

Ours Poetica

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Relationships:	Dream SMP Ensemble & TommyInnit , Wilbur Soot & Technoblade & TommyInnit & Phil Watson , Clay Dream & Technoblade & TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF) , Cara CaptainPuffy & TommyInnit
Characters:	Toby Smith Tubbo , Ranboo (Video Blogging RPF) , Sam Awesamdude , Cara CaptainPuffy , Niki Nihachu , Eret (Video Blogging RPF) , Clay Dream (Video Blogging RPF) , Dream SMP Ensemble , Ponk DropsByPonk (Video Blogging RPF) , Foolish - Character , Karl Jacobs , Sapnap (Video Blogging RPF) , Alexis Quackity , Grayson Purpled (Video Blogging RPF) , Hannah Hannahxxrose , TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF)
Additional Tags:	Sleepy Bois Inc as Family , Sleepy Bois Inc Angst , TommyInnit-centric (Video Blogging RPF) , Older Siblings Wilbur Soot and Technoblade , Bad Parent Phil Watson (Video Blogging RPF) , Performance Poetry , Slam Poetry , TommyInnit Needs a Hug (Video Blogging RPF) , Bench- trio , Author Projecting onto TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF) , Emotional Hurt/Comfort , Dysfunctional Family , Single Parent Phil Watson (Video Blogging RPF) , honestly i'm just here to have fun , TommyInnit Angst (Video Blogging RPF) , Poet Tommyinnit , Bedrock- bros , Sad TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF) , Implied/Referenced Child Abuse , not c!phil tho someone else , Child Neglect , now that one IS c!phil , Heavy Angst , Loss of Parent(s) , Implied/Referenced Character Death , Sad Wilbur Soot , Implied/Referenced Suicide
Language:	English
Collections:	fics that are stuck in my head (rent-free) , C! Tommy angs that i cried for , Dream SMP Fics (Mainly Tommy (Yeah I'm That Bitch)) , Fics that get me both feeling and losing my shit for the nth time , Good fics , Dream SMP fics that butter my bread , wow i really am reading mc fanfiction 🥰 , 🥰, thinksmoon's collection of best sbi fics , unfinished fics i adore!!! , pebble's curated , late night bittersweet reads , Banger MCYT Fics that Nearly Caused Me To Fail University , Areus' Fic Recommendations , PianoBoos_Pain , lee's favorite fics that you should definitely read as well :) , best fucking fics of all time oh my god , Books Like Poems , favorites , recommended to me , Late Night Reads For Restless Spirits , Cross' Collection of DSMP/SBI fics (unfinished) , Multi-Fandom Fic Collection , The best MCYT fics you've ever read , sbi fics (mostly angst because im mentally ill) , the best works i've ever read , would eat 10/10 , Currently Reading , It's 3am and I am sobbing , Rebel's favorite fics!(smp) ,

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Ours Poetica

by [zeeskeit](#)

Summary

Tommy was handed a small flyer in printed in black and white, with the words “POETRY NIGHT - OPEN MIC” splayed across the front in bubbled font. He fumbled with his binder as he took it, eyes wide as he said, “are you sure? I mean, I love poetry and all, but I don’t think-I’m not sure—what if I can’t write poetry?”

Mr. Sam’s dark eyes softened, and he reached out to place a hand on Tommy’s shoulder, squeezing it gently. “Everyone has to start somewhere; every poet, from me to Rudy Francisco, started off without knowing a clue about what we were doing. Tommy, it’s not about if you can or cannot write poetry, it’s about if you want to.”

or:

The performance poetry AU in which Tommy joins a slam team and finds a home in the arts.

"where beauty stands and waits"

Chapter Notes

Title from "Constantly Risking Absurdity" by the masterful Lawrence Ferlinghetti.

No TWS other than yelling/familial arguments!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It had been gradual. Being the youngest, Tommy was used to being the center of attention; always one for easy affection and causing a bit of havoc, his family had practically been forced to dote on him. His father spent more time shepherding him out of harms way than sleeping, and he cajoled his brothers into indulging every impulse he had. If he was being honest, his early childhood had been a happy one, of lawns flush with dandelions and rough-housing with his brothers, late nights spent whispering ghost stories under covers and all the things that made growing up bittersweet.

But things changed, they always did, and his family was no different.

It had started off simple; his brothers were suddenly spending less time with him, occupied with high school and the separate hobbies that kept them out of Tommy's orbit. Tommy would knock on Wilbur's door to find the teen with headphones on his head and a notebook in hand, hunching over the pages as he scribbled down whatever song lyrics or fragments of a poem must thunder in his head, shouting at Tommy to *get the fuck out of his room*. Tommy didn't even bother with Techno, he was never home anyways. Always practicing fencing or studying at the library.

It was times like that where Tommy saw how his two brothers, so different than the other, were twins. They were like parallel streetcars, always rushing along the trolley-lines of their own lives that kept them separated, never crossing but always brushing past one another. Tommy rarely saw the two in the same room, but sometimes, late at night, he would hear them chatting quietly in the living room in tones softer than he'd heard in a while. No matter how much they pretended to hate each other, how many hours of 'silent-treatment' they condemned each other to or how much they bickered, they were twins. They understood their other half in the way no one else could—and they mutually agreed to ice their youngest brother out.

Tommy used to joke to his dad that the twins only got along when they ganged up on him, but as the years passed and Tommy grew from five to six to seven to ten, it seemed like his brothers had turned humor into reality. The days of light hearted teasing and kicked shins under kitchen tables were gone, now it was just rolled eyes and too-rough shoves and huffs of *would you shut up and leave me alone for five minutes?*

Dad was no help. The man was either driving Techno to a tournament or at work, rarely giving so much as a quick ‘see ya later mate’ to Tommy as he hurried out the door. The few hours that he spent in the house was split between knocking out on the couch or braving Wilbur’s constant need to pick a fight. The two were constantly arguing now, over dinner plates and morning pots of coffee, and Lord help anyone caught in the crossfire. Tommy did his best to avoid the two when they got into it, and Techno was always gone anyways, but it was like they were two black holes trying to drag him into their chaos; every shouting match either had his name crop up or ended with both of them telling him off.

And today was just the same: Wilbur and Dad were getting into another pissing contest, and Techno was out of the house. At first Tommy had tried to block out the harsh whispers of his family in the kitchen, trying to focus on the DS in his hands, but the whispers soon bloomed into shouts as Wilbur’s venomous snarl floated from the other room.

“—no, it’s because *you* keep leaving to take Techno to tournaments! It’s the middle of the semester year! Why can’t he take a break for a month?”

He’s not wrong, he thought even as he feigned indifference, watching Mario jump over a koopa shell on his screen.

“Will, mate, you know that this is important to your brother—“

“As important as our family? As me? Oh, and don’t get me started on Tommy—“

A Bullet-Bill rushed towards him, and he scrambled to press the *up* button, barely making it to safety.

“Now Will...”

“You just leave me alone! *With him!* Do you know how hard it is? Knowing that I could go out into the world, enjoy my life, but noooo, I have a stupid little brother to look after—“

“I know he’s a hassle but—“

He was approaching Bowser’s castle now, the red flag promising a struggle with every pixilated wave. He gripped his DS tighter. It was fine, he’d done this level a hundred times before, what was once more?

“Hassle? Oh, you have *no* idea. He’s always talking or whining, always making things about himself! I barely have any friends because I always have to hang out with him, no one wants to talk to the weirdo and *his bratty brother!*”

His thumb slipped just as Bowser spat fire at him and Dad let out and indignant *Wilbur!* Tommy’s heart pounded in his ears and he felt his lungs seize, the forgotten screen in his hands flashing black and red as YOU DIED appeared on screen. He was acting stupid, it wasn’t anything he hadn’t heard before—hell, Techno called him a brat or a gremlin practically every day—but he had never heard Wilbur say it before, especially not like-like *that*. There was something acidic in his tone that burned to even process; it sounded like disgust.

The DS shook in his hands, the same grainy song pinging out his speakers as he stared blankly in front of him—YOU DIED. YOU DIED. TRY AGAIN? SAVE & QUIT? —and he couldn't stop himself as he listened to Wilbur's footsteps, how they thundered down the hallway and up the stairs, slowly ebbing away as he grew farther and farther from the man in the kitchen and boy on the couch.

He crawled into bed that night and tucked his head underneath the comforter, hoping that if he could burrow deeper into his mattress and the blankets swamping him, he could pretend that there were no tears on his cheeks or that everything hadn't just changed. This was just another night, he soothed himself, bleary eyes trained on the cotton sky above him, another argument where Wilbur said things he didn't mean and Dad threw his hands up in exasperation. This wasn't the ending or beginning of anything—it was just another night. And it would be better in the morning.

When he woke up, it was to cool air and a stucco ceiling. He had thrown the blankets off in his sleep.

The rest was practically inevitable. His brothers graduated from high school the following year, and suddenly Tommy was alone. Techno had flew across the country to some pretentious-ass private school back east, riding on a full scholarship from fencing and the title of high school valedictorian, while Wilbur went to a state school to study theater and music. The young adult bitched about it, came over on weekends to do laundry and complain about his dorm-mates who reenacted the entirety of Les Mis at 3am or professors who were 'hard-asses', but Tommy could tell he loved it. He could see it in the way he rambled about their latest production or the house parties where he played in a band with his friends. *Friends*, what Wilbur had craved so much (apparently enough to leave Tommy behind), were suddenly in abundance. He skipped weekend dinners to drive down highways late at night, ignored Tommy in favor of constantly texting his crew (Niki and Eret, if he remembered clearly. Maybe some kid named Furry or Funky), and missed birthdays in favor of practicing with bandmates. Tommy pretended he didn't mind, told Dad that he was glad Will had 'finally stopped lurking around the house', but his father never did more than shoot him a pinched smile and nervously laugh.

Then his brother took a year abroad to a London school and never came back, claiming that it was cheaper to stay with his current program, reassuring Dad that the degree would transfer if he came back home. *If*. Apparently his friends were going too (which Tommy found suspicious, as if it was planned all along and not some happy accident) and Will would share a flat with them to cut down on expenses. For all intents and purposes, his brother was being rational, and Dad easily gave in.

So Tommy didn't see either of his brothers for four years. That was fine: Techno was horrid company anyway, and Wilbur had fallen into this whole 'sad boy' aesthetic a while ago, definitely people he didn't want at Thanksgiving.

With his two oldest in college and with Tommy getting old enough to stay at home alone, Dad spent more time at work than ever. He was a software engineer at a local development company, and was working really hard for a promotion that would help secure Tommy's

college savings. It was necessary, his father would say, that he was *sorry, really mate*, that he couldn't take Tommy to his first middle school dance or go to back-to-school night, he just had to work.

Tommy said he understood, and he did. It was necessary, it was rational, just like Wilbur going to England or Techno taking the scholarship in Massachusetts.

Now he awoke to an empty house, Dad already gone for an early shift and the bus on its way. He cultivated his own little routine: brush his teeth, take a shower, make a breakfast of pop tarts or staled cereal, and grab his back-pack before heading out.

By the time he was entering high school, Wilbur had decided to live in England permanently and Techno had signed on for another four years of grad school in Western Mass. Dad had been promoted from software designer to the executive lead of the company's location he worked at, and life hummed along. The phone calls from both his brothers still came every day like clockwork, and the family was happier than ever; being abroad had smoothed over Wilbur and Dad's relationship, and Techno was on track to become a professor almost right out of grad school with an impressive tenure at an elite school. Life was perfect.

For everyone but Tommy apparently. Four months into his first semester in high school he had more Ds than Cs, and was mandated to at least five hours of tutoring each week. It wasn't that he wasn't trying (he was, God, he was trying so hard), but he just...couldn't get it. Even as stayed up until 2am every night pouring over course materials and study guides, even as he watched video after video on Khan Academy, he couldn't pass the countless tests that came his way. Teachers would hand back quizzes with a sour face and a 'meet me after class' scribbled in the margins of an in-class FRQ; the tutor he was assigned to quick gave up, complaining he was too hard to teach. They told him he needed to get his grades up or he would have to repeat the year, and Tommy wanted to scream. He was trying, *he was*, but it didn't seem like it mattered.

(By now he expected Dad to notice the progress reports he just happened to 'lose', or the desk lamp that never seemed to turn off in his room and countless papers, but he never did)

And then Tommy had met Tubbo, and everything had just *clicked*.

They had met during a group project in honors bio (one that Tommy *needed* a 100% on or he would definitely fail this year) and the two had gotten along like a house on fire. Tubbo was able to tell when Tommy was struggling and never hesitated to explain a concept to him, words slow but not demeaning and always using practical analogies to make it easier to understand. It wasn't that the kid was good at school necessarily, or that he was somehow a natural genius, but he understood Tommy in a way no one had before. Likewise, Tommy was there to read words that Tubbo got twisted around because his dyslexia, and ease the tension out of the room when the boy got frustrated with a piece they were reading in lit class. Funnily enough, lit class was the only one Tommy had an B in, and he loved rambling to Tubbo about the readings the boy didn't do as if a personal Sparknotes. They were an odd pair—a dyslexic kid who wanted to be a nuclear physicist and a boy who hated all sciences and only wanted to read classics—but they knew the other more than he knew himself. Sometimes, Tommy wasn't sure where he started and Tubbo stopped, but he found that he

didn't really care. It was nice to be a part of something, *someone*, like that. He hadn't felt that connected to anyone in a while.

Within a month and a half of them knowing each other, Tommy's grades had raised significantly, and he had almost straight Bs with the exception of an A in lit and a high C in biology. By second semester, he had a healthy mix of As and Bs to immortalize on his final transcript for the year. To celebrate, him and Tubbo saw a movie and got ice cream; as they sat on a bench outside of the theater, happily licking at their ice-cream cones, Tubbo had called Tommy his best friend for the first time.

Tubbo would never let him live down the tears that exploded from him.

That evening he had raced home with his report card in hand, a grin on his face, and chocolate ice cream staining his hoodie. As soon as his father had walked in the door, he pressed the orange envelope to his hands, practically bursting with pride.

Phil had taken one look at the assortment of As, Bs, and Cs, and managed a weak smile before saying, "alright, how about next year we try a bit harder, okay Toms?"

When night fell he went to bed with his comforter tugged over his head. It was still there when he woke up.

In junior year his English teacher had pulled him aside to chat after class. Tommy tried to shrug off his anxiety; Mr. Sam (or Mr. Awesome-Dude Tommy had taken to jokingly calling him) had a bit of a soft spot for Tommy since becoming his Honors Literature teacher in freshman year, watching him struggle and all that, and was more than thrilled to see Tommy sitting in his AP Language class the following year. Tommy practically lived in the man's classroom, eating lunch in there when Tubbo or Ranboo were in club meetings or just showing up after school to chat the man's ear off. When all the other teachers had given up on him, it was Mr. Sam who had believed in Tommy, staying after the final bell rung to explain difficult texts to him and recommend outside reading. He had granola bars in his desk drawer for the days that Tommy was too late to have breakfast or pack a lunch, and snuck him Coca-Colas after all-nighters. Plus, he was a young teacher, around the same age as his brothers, and didn't make cringe-y jokes or force his presentation to have stupid pinterest memes.

Easily, Mr. Sam had become his favorite adult ever. So why was he nervous?

"You're not in trouble," was the first thing Mr. Sam had said as Tommy watched the other students file out the classroom to their fourth period, "I just wanted to talk to you about an opportunity I think you'd enjoy."

"An opportunity?" Tommy clutched his binder tighter to his chest, allowing one of the straps of his back pack to slop off his shoulder and tug his arm down at the added weight. "Is it extra credit? That's very kind, but I don't think I need any this year." He had all As other than a B in environmental science (which honestly, fuck that class), and his highest grade was a 98% in this class. Tommy didn't see why he'd need any extra credit.

Mr. Sam's lips twitched into what could be called a smile—he wasn't the most expressive man, kept his voice lowered even when lecturing and his laughs were nothing more than gentle puffs of breath caught in his throat, but Tommy recognized the subtle shift in his expression for what it was: pride.

"You're right, you don't need extra credit. In fact, you're doing so well in my class that I wanted to offer you an opportunity I haven't had the ability to give to many students. Tommy, not many kids have an eye for literature the way you do, and even less have a genuine love for writing the way I see you have. In fact, some of your analysis during our poetry unit was the best I've seen in a while, nonetheless from someone in high school." Tommy felt something warm bubble in his chest at that, and he fought off a grin. He really had loved the poetry unit, and loved making sarcastic jokes in the margins of his paper about classical poets more; to hear that Mr. Sam had enjoyed that analysis, had thought it some of the *best* he's seen, had him practically over the moon.

"So," Mr. Sam started, voice pitching upwards as he dug something out from a manilla folder and handed it to Tommy, "I wanted you to check out this open mic that's going to be nearby. It's the first of a few poetry events that are happening this month, and there's going to be a few workshops happening alongside it, and I think you'd really enjoy it. Might get to write something new and share your work."

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Mr. Sam's dark eyes softened, and he reached out to place a hand on Tommy's shoulder, squeezing it gently. "Everyone has to start somewhere; every poet, from me to Rudy Francisco, started off without knowing a clue about what we were doing. Tommy, it's not about if you can or cannot write poetry, it's about if you *want* to."

Tommy's eyes were practically bugging outside of his head. "You write poetry? Really?"

Mr. Sam let out a laugh, quiet and airy. "Yeah, I'm actually reading at the event with a few of my friends. If you go, I'm sure they'd love to tell you all about my embarrassing days as a new poet, and how many persona poems I butchered."

Tommy felt a grin tug at his face, and he gripped the flyer tighter. Mr. Sam, a poet? Sure it made sense in retrospect, the man always was more vibrant when talking rhyme scheme and form than he ever was talking logical fallacies, but still: he had never met a poet in real life before. Heck, he hadn't read any other poets than the ones that were assigned in class. Sure, he knew the famous names like Maya Angelou or Robert Frost, but he didn't know anything about contemporary poetry.

Yet, a small voice in the back of his head buzzed, one that sounded suspiciously like Tubbo during a late night studying session, *but you've got time to learn.*

Tommy looked down at the flyer, marveling at the picture of a person stood in front of a microphone with a notebook in hand that was printed in dark ink. Something in him, the

hopeful part of him that he liked to keep hidden, the part that used to whisper that his brothers would return and his father would stay, was screaming to go. This could be it; this could be his *thing*. Tubbo had Science Olympiad, and Ranboo had Model UN—this could be something just for Tommy.

And, the thought crept up, *I wouldn't have to come home to an empty house.*

And just like that, the decision was made.

“So, when exactly is this whole thing going down? And do I get to boo you if the poem sucks?”

This time Mr. Sam's smile was wide enough to show teeth.

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And so was the beginning of something beautiful. Poetry became Tommy's saving grace, his release: had he never been too good with feelings, heck, his family outright avoided talking about them, but poetry was the outlet he needed. The pages of his notebook were a sanctuary, where his thoughts tumbled over one another in ink stains and the stray marks of a pen, where his words were able to breathe and die—he could seethe in these pages, write odes to sunsets and ice cream trucks, and eulogize his childhood in pantoums about photo-frames and dandelions. There was something magical about the way he lost himself in the act of creating, words becoming the wings he launched himself into the sky with, that let him to swoop and dive and free fall and all the weightlessness he was afraid of allowing himself.

Poetry *was* Tommy.

At his third open mic he saw a poem read that changed his life. Rather, not read, but performed. The writer had come up to mic, notebook missing with eyes unflinchingly trained ahead, and opened her mouth and *spoke*.

The performance was nothing like Tommy had seen before; it catapulted itself into a narrative of grief, the tiniest grimace of her face implying a whole world of emotion that existed beyond the page, each bitter smile at mentions of broken hearts and ruined friendships giving Tommy an insight into the soul of another person. But more than anything, Tommy loved her *voice*: the way it trembled upon mentions of a mother, the way it blossomed as she reminisced about cherry-bombs on swings and summer nights...he could see her unspool the story's thread a bit more with each inflection of her voice. It was all so delicate, like a spiders web coming undone.

Then he saw a group slam poem, and knew he had to get in on this.

Mr. Sam mentioned offhandedly that he used to perform in a slam team competitively in college, and knew a few folks that could get him involved. One being the woman who had performed earlier, Puffy.

Puffy, to put it simply, was a *badass*. She apparently was a national champion in slam poetry, and had a few collections out that Tommy couldn't wait to get his hands on. Not only that,

but she gave on such strong ‘Don’t Fuck With Me’ vibes all while being nurturing towards those she loved; she was a multitude of things, but mostly, she was just really fucking cool.

“I’d love to talk slam with you! Have you ever competed before?” She smiled up at him from where she sat, nursing a cup of mint tea. Tommy shuffled awkwardly, and next to him Mr. Sam gave an encouraging nudge with his elbow. Tommy flushed pink.

“Uh-no. You actually were the first performance I’ve ever seen so...”

Puffy blinked. She looked thrown off, curly hair falling in front her eyes before she pushed it off her forehead and grinned so bright Tommy thought he’d have to shield his eyes. “Oh! I’m your new Slam Mom, aren’t I? That works, I’ve already got a few kids under my wings, and you’ll vibe with Foolish and the others.”

“Um, what?”

“Of course, you’re still going to need to try out, no one gets on the team without working for it, but I have a feeling you’ll surprise me. Slam season starts up in March, and we have a big one coming up this summer, so I’d get your classic and response together. I’m sure Sam’ll help you.” She paused and took a sip of her tea, before squinting back at Tommy. “How old are you again?”

“Uh, sixteen. Seventeen next April.” Tommy hadn’t a clue what was going on, but he didn’t want to get on Puffy’s bad side by ignoring her question.

“Ohh, a young one? You’d probably be the youngest we’ve ever had on our team. Interesting. Well, Sam will give you the details about the try outs once I figure them out and I can’t wait to see you there.” She stood, smile still plastered on her face as she extended a hand for Tommy to shake. He took it hesitantly, jolted by the eager pumps she gave it. “Great to meet you, Tommy! See you this spring!”

And with that, the poet walked away, leaving a starstruck Tommy and chuckling Sam. The older man looked down at his student and gave him a gentle smile, nodding his head towards the cafe door as the two began to depart for the night.

“Looks like we’ve got to get you prepped for an audition.”

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Tommy grinded for weeks to prepare his classic and response for this audition. For his classical poem, he chose “Constantly Risking Absurdity” by Lawrence Ferlinghetti—it was one he had always loved, a poem disjointed by form but brought flesh together with the reader through images of acrobats and high-wires. Sam walked him through the process of writing a response: he was supposed to write a poem that aligned or contradicted the same themes that the classical author was discussing, as if in a conversation with the original material. At first, Tommy had no idea what that meant—how were you ‘in conversation’ with a poem? Yet, as he spent time re-reading the poem, looking at each line, he started to figure it out.

Truthfully, to be a poet was to ‘constantly risk absurdity’, to live in constant apprehension that one day you’d push the boundary too far, make yourself an outcast amongst outcasts. To be a poet was to stand on a tight rope and balance over the chaos of daily life as you tried to make sense of it, to do flips and perform for the masses all while holding your breath. It was the same feeling he got whenever Mr. Sam read one of his drafts, the same breathless fear in his stomach he got when Tubbo stole his poetry notebook and flipped through the pages. To constantly pursue beauty while alienating yourself from its bounds; he was a poet. And so he decided to write about that, what it meant to him to be a poet.

So Tommy wrote, rewrote, scrapped draft after draft of his response as the date of his audition loomed closer. He took each critique Mr. Sam gave in stride, keeping a special page in his notebook full of edits he wanted to make to each new draft. He practiced memorizing his classic all the while, workshopping his performance with Mr. Sam and testing it out on Tubbo and Ranboo (who knew absolutely nothing about what he was doing or what made a good performance but hey, it was just nice for your friends to clap for you sometimes).

At home he would go about his chores reciting lines from his poems. His father would walk in late at night to find his son pacing the length of the kitchen as he scrubbed at countertops and dishes, muttering to himself (“And he, a little Chaplincharley man...no, wait. And he, a little *charleychaplin* man who may not catch her...*fair*, eternal form. Get it together, Tommy,”).

His father didn’t ask questions about where his son went every Friday night or why he was seemingly reciting poetry like a mad man, and so Tommy didn’t tell him. He was content to let the man live his own life, separate and parallel from his. He had something to do now, no longer staring forlornly at locked doors and empty bedrooms. He was on a mission, and he wouldn’t let his father’s inquisitive stare distract him.

And when the audition came, Tommy *killed* it.

## Chapter End Notes

Hopefully you liked this chapter! I have no beta so feel free to point out any spelling mistakes/errors, though some may be intentional!

Thank you for reading so far!

edit 1.27.22: i changed the name of the poet Mr. Sam mentions in this chapter and the description after a commenter let me know about some of the bad shit he did so! thank you to them! and now it is a Rudy Francisco shout out! Sorry if that made anyone uncomfortable or upset in anyway! /gen

# "The nows of summer glitter in a ring; These are cities where I had hoped to live"

## Chapter Notes

Chapter title from "Triolet for Late July" by Peter Kline! Just recently re-discovered this beauty, so I recommend you check it out!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It was the summer before senior year that it changed again.

At first everything was looking up: he had finished the year with all As, managing to pull his grade up from a B+ after countless hours studying with Tubbo over discord, and he was on Puffy's slam team for this upcoming summer slam. He was stoked: the SMP Slam was the biggest in North America, and there were going to be international teams competing in Los Angeles with them. He had never been to an in-person slam before, had only seen Youtube compilations of the big ones like BNV or CUPSI, and he was practically buzzing with excitement at the idea of attending the largest one of the year.

Sure, he was anxious, but who wouldn't be? SMP Slam was unique; unlike most classic or team slams, SMP was an immediate elimination slam - if your team scored the lowest in a round, you were immediately eliminated. There were no bouts, just constant sudden death.

Oh, and he was the youngest member of his team, which was *horrifying*.

They tried not to, but Tommy could tell his teammates treated him differently because of his age: among the five poets in total (Puffy, Ponk, Foolish, who he had seen in passing, Tommy, and some dude he hadn't seen before named Dream), Tommy was the only one who had never competed before. Hell, he hadn't even performed before the audition. He was completely new to the scene, and being only a little more than half the ages of his slam-mates did nothing for his confidence.

Their first meet up had gone smoothly—Mr. Sam drove Tommy to practice (at the same coffee shop he had first met Puffy) and he was introduced to two new faces. First was Foolish: the man was, to be perfectly honest, a lovable idiot. Don't get Tommy wrong, the guy had some serious bars, and every poem he wrote stuck to your skin like syrup and felt impossible to get off, but the dude lacked some common sense sometimes. Tommy would watch him switch from waxing poetic about the 'inherent ethical dilemma of sharing poetry to be consumed in a competition' to immediately forgetting a door was a push instead of a pull. It was kinda funny how Puffy treated him like a massive toddler (because holy shit, the dude was even taller than Ranboo), and everyone on the team mutually agreed that Foolish should never be left in a room by himself, *ever*.

Ponk, on the other hand, was a force to be reckoned with. Even missing an arm (lost, he said, in an unfortunate accident while in the car with Mr. Sam), the man was more capable than all the teammates put together: he could fix up cars, fix the leaky faucet in Puffy's kitchen, and just generally retained the most practical knowledge of the crew. Not to mention he wrote explosively, diction dripping with gasoline and all things flammable. He once told Tommy that his greatest influences came from the music he listened to as a kid; Wu-Tang Clan, Fugees, The Roots, all rap groups that were able to twist their words into gravity-defying rhythm, and were masters of repetition. Ponk had obviously taken after them, the refrains of his poem subtly shifting with each utterance, from the inflection of his voice or the rearranging of letters, he told entire stories all while repeating the same set of lines.

Oh, and he was Mr. Sam's boyfriend; Tommy was absolutely stoked to see him perform at the slam.

Dream was another story. He apparently had a super close relationship with Puffy that went way back (and Tommy could tell by the way he lingered next to the team captain, how she affectionally referred to him as her 'duckling'), but he rarely spoke, like, ever. When he did decide to open his mouth, his words were booming and rushed, as if he was desperate to get them out. He walked through the room as if he owned it, all silent and brooding, and spoke as if the entire universe revolved around what he had to say. Tommy had to admit it, he got sketchy vibes from the guy. And from the way Dream tilted his head upon first meeting Tommy, as if he was a mountain cat stalking prey, Tommy knew the feeling was mutual.

When he brought his concerns to Puffy, the captain had just let out a small chuckle and said, "oh don't mind Dream, he just hates not knowing something. Until he figures you out, he's going to act like an ass the entire time."

Tommy didn't know what 'figuring him out' entailed, but he wanted it to be over sooner than later. The man was a masterful poet—Dream had a way with language that Tommy could tell the entire team salivated at, and he was always bringing fresh poem ideas to practice—and an even better performer. Tommy wasn't sure how the dude did it, it was as if he was looking at the world through eyes that were entirely alien, and he had the uncanny ability to focus on the smallest details that wove themselves into daily life. Dream wrote about everything and anything, from the cobwebs stuck in the cabinet under his kitchen sink to war torn cities, the man had managed to find poetics in what Tommy had thought as mundane.

(Tommy really, really wanted Dream to like him—it would be so cool to talk imagery with him)

The first practice they started with a writing warm up and then launched right into discussing the optics of the slam. It was simple: there would be four teams in a room and four rounds. At the end of each round the lowest scoring team would be eliminated (thus, why it was considered a 'survival' slam), and the remaining teams would go forward. At the end of the four rounds, the top team would be sent to room two where they would complete the process all over again—by the time they had made it through those two rooms, the remaining teams would all go to finals where they would battle it out for the title.

Puffy said this all with an air of nonchalance that was not befitting of the information, as if she hadn't said to Tommy the equivalent of, 'if you fuck up once, you fuck it up for the rest

of us.’ That was...a lot of pressure, to say the least. Knowing that if he slipped up, if he messed up the lines of his classic poem or completely bombed his response, he could literally end the slam right then and there for his team.

(He tried not to focus on that. He couldn’t; he needed to be present for his team, to not crumble under pressure)

Still, he left each practice bubbling with anticipation—being around such talented poets made him want to push his writing farther, to get better, and he loved watching his fellow poets create. The spark in Puffy’s eye when she thought of a particularly clever word play, how Foolish would bounce excitedly when he heard a great line, and how Dream would sometimes break his silence to scream about a contrapuntal—it was like a dream come true. Pun totally intended.

The dream always had to end when he came home. Phil didn’t bother to ask where Tommy went every Saturday night, or why he was spending less and less time at home, but instead began talking to his other sons on the phone for hours at a time. Techno would call and ramble about his newest research opportunity and how his classes were going, while Wilbur would occasionally call late at night to update his father on how the band was fairing.

Tommy never paid much attention to the phone calls at first, by now used to the indifferent fondness of his father towards him, but the phone calls kept becoming longer, and before long Tommy grew curious.

He had been sitting at the kitchen table, completing some summer homework (and what type of damned soul assigned summer government homework? That was cruel, unusual punishment, prosecutable by federal law—) when the familiar sound of “Toxic” by Britney Spears played. The ringtone had gotten midway into the chorus by the time Phil had picked it up with a casual ‘ayup’, wedging the phone between his shoulder and ear as he watched chili simmer on the stove. Tommy settled himself in the chair and prepared to tune out Wilbur’s call; it was probably something about Niki or Eret, or a question on how to wash bed linens, something inconsequential.

“You’re coming back to the States? When?”

Okay so he was wrong.

Tommy pitched forward in his seat, government homework forgotten as he strained to hear what Wilbur was saying on the other line. His brother’s voice was muffled, grainy as it popped from the speakers of Phil’s phone, but it was unmistakably Wilbur’s in the way his voice lilted, as if each statement was a suggest as opposed to an order. His brother always had the silver-tongue of the three, able to talk his way out of anything; he’d been the only one to have never been grounded while under Phil’s roof.

“With Techno? Really?” Tommy felt something prickly stir in his gut. What? What was that about Techno? The man was still working on his final thesis, last Tommy heard, and would be occupied with research the entire summer. Why would Wilbur bring him up, and what would he be doing *with* Techno?



“Uh huh...” Phil’s attention had been completely stolen from the chili pot in front of him, turning with his arms crossed to lean against the counter. He made brief eye contact with Tommy, who was practically jumping up and down in his seat with impatience, before muttering, “what time?”

There was a muddled response from Wilbur, and suddenly Phil was scrambling to write something on a sticky-note. “Okay, gotcha. We’ll be there to pick you up. Do you know what terminal you guys will be at?”

*Oh fuck me*, realization was cold as it hit Tommy, and he slowly stood from the table to start towards his room. Phil hadn’t turned around from where he was scribbling on a sticky-note, still nodding and humming along to whatever Wilbur was saying—this was insane. There was no way his brother, *both of his brothers*, were coming to visit. They hadn’t been home in practically seven years; they hadn’t even regularly seen Tommy since he was *eleven*. A lot had changed since then, more than just his height or missing baby-teeth, and Christ, he was turning *eighteen* next spring. What would they think of him now? Would they still see that bratty, stupid, annoying little brother that had initially driven them away, or would they see who he was now: a poet, a growing one, who had made language the Noah’s Ark to loneliness’ flood?

There were too many questions he wanted to ask, too many he was afraid of having answered. His feet had already carried him to the white door of his bedroom, marked his by the chipped paint from a game of indoor volleyball gone awry with Ranboo. His father hadn’t been home for that, he remembered, too busy at work and on the phone with his other sons; no one had painted over the large scrape in the wood’s face. He pushed through the door and shut it with a click behind him, breathing shallow and eyes squeezed shut. This couldn’t be happening.

*Why now?* He wanted to cry, or scream, something like that, *why after all these years? Why right before the slam, the most important moment of my life? Why can’t I have anything for myself?*

The dimly lit room had no answer.

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They arrived at the airport at 6am in the morning the following Tuesday. It was an insipid date for a family reunion, just a random weekday in the beginnings of July, but Tommy couldn’t help but find it fitting: his family was not one of poetics, and nothing was less poetic than LAX on a Tuesday morning.

For some god-forsaken reason, Wilbur and Techno had decided to get a red-eye out of Boston to Los Angeles International Airport, meaning Phil and Tommy had to wake up at 4am to even get there in time to pick them up. Tommy had been struggling to stay awake as he sat in the passenger seat of his father’s car, head lulling against the cool windowpane as he watched the LA traffic crawl past, headlights quivering in the early mist that had begun to overtake the freeways. Music hissed out of the radio’s face, cleaving the silence between them as they pulled into the airport terminal; Phil hadn’t said much during the drive, quietly remarking about the morning traffic at every red light, but the man seemed content to sit in silence. Tommy had never dealt well with the quiet, but he was too exhausted to do anything other

than plug his phone into the AUX chord and turn up the music. Phil grimaced slightly as Tommy blasted the entire discography of Brockhampton, but remained quiet as he gripped the steering wheel.

(Fun fact: turns out once you became friends with poets, your music taste expands *exponentially*. Tommy now had at least twenty new albums saved in his phone, including some Neo-soul mixes from Ponk that Tommy was sure Techno would *detest*)

“Alright, here we are,” Phil muttered distractedly as he pulled up to the side of the curb, blue eyes scanning for his sons in the herd of people exiting LAX’s glass doors, “Wilbur texted that they just touched down, so they should be here in a few minutes.”

Tommy squirmed in his seat, biting into his bottom lip as he struggled to get comfortable—he was nervous (understatement of the year). He hadn’t spoken much to his brothers in the past eight years, just happy birthdays and holiday well-wishes over the phone, and he was already dreading the lulls in conversation that were bound to occur. The last time he had a conversation with both his brothers, *a real one*, not one consisting of half-hearted questions about classes and what movie was in theaters, was the Christmas before Wilbur had left for Europe. Techno had flown out from Massachusetts and for once, the entire family were huddled together under one roof. It had been a night of hot chocolate and grainy holiday specials from the 60s, but it had been the best night of Tommy’s life.

There was a flash of a sickeningly familiar pink, then, Phil let out a surprised hum before honking his horn twice. Tommy dug his nails into his palm as he saw the pink head turn, the indifferent gaze of the stranger, his older brother, landing on their car. Tommy tasted something sour on his tongue as his mouth went dry.

Techno’s lips twitched into a grin, and he craned his neck to shout over his shoulder. Emerging from the sea of bodies hurrying between terminals was no other than Wilbur, looming over his brother with those stupid round glasses on his slender face and dark eyes glittering in excitement. He rose his hands to wave at Phil and Tommy in the car, before letting out a whoop. Techno nudged his twin in the ribs with his elbow, rolling his eyes with thinly veiled fondness as the two dragged their suitcases to the car.

“Okay,” Phil said, breathless, as if he too was suddenly aware that more than just a curb and sidewalk distanced them from the men walking towards them, “right. Tommy, help your brothers with their suitcases.”

He nodded and quickly unbuckled himself from his seat, the flurry of his hands betraying his anxiety. Okay, this was fine, he would just help them put their bags in the trunk and then chill in the front seat. Then he could go hang out with Tubbo and Ranboo and show them the coffee shop he’d been practicing at. He wouldn’t even have to interact with his brothers, it would be *fine*.

“I don’t think there’s room in the boot Phil,” Wilbur’s voice strained above the clamor of the terminal pick-up, “I think we’ll have to put some bags up there with us.”

“That’s fine! Put anything else in the front and Tommy’ll sit with you guys in the back.” Tommy tried to stifle the grimace overtaking his features, and screwed his lips into a frown.

Great. His plans of tuning his brothers out were ruined. “Tommy, hurry up! The drive is going to be long so let’s get going!”

He felt his stomach turn. A two-plus car ride in the backseat with his brothers. Two hours of being hip-to-hip with the men, the *strangers*, that he could barely recognize.

*Fan-fucking-tastic.*

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This couldn’t be going worse.

Wilbur wasn’t an idiot (neglecting Techno’s gibes about a certain incident including a bottle of vodka and a fishbowl), he knew that it was going to be...awkward, the first time he reunited with his little brother. It had been years since they had last seen each other face to face, and fuck, his brother had grown up.

The baby-faced, rowdy little gremlin was nowhere to be found, replaced by a lanky teen with poor posture and a deep scowl. There was still the same golden hair and brilliant blue eyes that he remembered, the same wrinkle of his nose to show when he disliked something or puffing of his cheeks when he was bored, but it was...different. As if each expression was somewhat downturned, tinted with a bitterness that Wilbur sent Wilbur’s eyebrows furrowing. Sure, he hadn’t expected Tommy to be ecstatic at his brothers’ arrival, but he sure as Hell hadn’t expected the teen to look downright murderous as he was squeezed between the twins.

“How was the flight, boys?” Phil asked from where he sat in the driver’s seat, eyes meeting Wilbur’s in the rearview mirror. The musician shrugged, eyes still trained on the blonde teenager sat next to him with his glare determinedly pinned on the screen of the phone in his hand.

“It was fine, hit a bit of turbulence while flying over the midwest, but it was loads better than my flight from the UK. The airline I was on accidentally switched Niki’s and Eret’s tickets for another flight so they’re actually coming in tomorrow.” He was not being nosy, he told himself as he squinted to read whatever Tommy was staring at, he was just trying to find some middle ground to talk about. “Forgot how much I hated American TSA too. They’re always so strict about their stupid rules - they took an entire bottle of shampoo.” Maybe the kid was really into a phone game, like Angry Birds or TapNinja. He wasn’t too old for that, was he? He was just sixteen.

*Seventeen, Will. Too old for some stupid phone game,* his conscious chided, sounding eerily like Niki whenever he said something particularly stupid. He cringed. Right. Seventeen - not a fun age.

Alright, so whatever was on Tommy’s screen was definitely not Angry Birds. It looked like it was text...an article perhaps? Or a book? He tried to subtly lean closer, shifting so his shoulder touched his brothers. Tommy startled at the contact, looking up to give Wilbur a stink-eye before shutting his phone off. Wilbur waited for the old dynamics to resurface, for his brother to cuss him out with too-many words and a hundred decibels above the appropriate volume, but all Tommy did was lean his head back and slide his eyes shut.

Across from him, Wilbur caught Techno's eye, who shook his head softly. *Whatever you're doing, cut it out*, the twitch of his twin's eyebrow practically screamed. Reluctantly, Wilbur settled back into his initial position, the pressure of Tommy's boney shoulder on his falling away.

"So, what's the game plan, old man?" Techno piped up, brushing his pink bangs out of his face as he grunted. "Are we going out for food? Or straight home?"

Phil hummed, eyes flicking across the road as he turned on his left hand signal and eased into the next lane. "Toms and I didn't eat breakfast yet, we could go pick something up or sit down? Whatever you two feel like, it's my treat."

Next to him, Tommy squirmed a bit, tugging on the seatbelt strap across his chest nervously as he cracked an eye open. "Oh, uh, I actually have to meet up with a few friends after this, so would it be okay if we went home? He's-he's picking up from the house so..."

"Friend? Who?" Wilbur asked at the same time Phil said, "where? We can drop you off to save a trip."

Tommy blanched, looking between his father and brother as if he didn't know who to respond to first. Wilbur felt the prickling of concern and tried to give Tommy a warm smile, to which the boy just frowned deeper. "It's just...it's at a coffee shop nearby. It's called Kinoko Coffee."

"Oh! Is that the place that used to be El Rapid's Seafood? I've been meaning to try it out. Who are you meeting there?" Phil's question was harmless, but Tommy looked like the man had just sent a bowling ball to the other's gut. Techno let out a small snort of amusement that had Wilbur cracking a smile.

"Uh, Tubbo an' Ranboo. Some kids from school. Really, it's not a big deal, they can just pick me up from our house. Ranboo has a license."

Phil blinked, face momentarily going blank as he processed his son's words. Wilbur frowned; did Phil not know who Tommy's friends were? Why wouldn't he, had Tommy never mentioned them?

Also, why didn't Tommy have a license? Was he just slow on the uptake, following in his brother Techno's footsteps and not getting his license until he was turning twenty, or did Phil not want him driving?

*We're missing a piece of the puzzle*, he could practically hear Techno pondering, and lo-and-behold, his twin has a similar puzzlement blanketing his features. *There's something Tommy isn't telling us...or maybe, something Phil isn't telling us.*

*Agreed.* Wilbur huffed internally, crossing his arms from where he sat as he eyed his youngest brother. Tommy's knee was bouncing up and down, his teeth gnawing on his bottom lip as he waited for Phil to respond. The car was quiet as the oldest passenger took and exit and glided off the freeway, the engine rumbling quietly as they drove. Then:

“Alright, why don’t we take you and we can all get breakfast at Kinoko’s? That way Ranboo doesn’t have to pick you up and you boys can hang out while the twins and I eat.”

“Yeah, I’m good with that.” Tommy looked anything but, his hands knotted into fists where they lay on his lap, shoulders riding up near his ears as he huddled into himself. It was odd, to see his brother so riddled up but decidedly quiet. This wasn’t the boy that Wilbur had grown up with, had taught how to hack The Sims and all the cheats to Mario Kart; this wasn’t the boy that Wilbur remembered trailing after him like a duckling, always trying to poke into Wilbur’s business or make his older brother laugh with his ridiculous antics.

It wasn’t *his* Tommy.

The thought had his breath catching in his throat, and he struggled to swallow it. No, that wasn’t true—it had to be the exhaustion making act like this, the kid had woken up early to get to the airport at 6am for Christ’s sake, and he hadn’t even had breakfast! Yeah, that or the nervousness; it must be weird seeing your older brothers after such a long time. They were just...struggling to fall back into old habits, that’s all. All it would take was a good meal and a bit of rest, and everything would be right as rain.

(He couldn’t listen to the feminine voice in his head telling him to stop pretending, to actually think about how this whole experience must be like for his little brother he hadn’t seen in almost seven years. Why hadn’t he ever visited? Why didn’t he think to even call his little brother? *He was an idiot*—)

It would be fine. He just needed to get Tommy one on one, that’s all, ask him how he was doing and catch up a bit. Easy, Wilbur could easily slip into the role of big brother again. It wasn’t like he had ever stopped, really.

(Right?)

“Hell yeah, can’t wait to embarrass Tommy in front of his friends. Hey Tech, still got his baby pictures on your phone?” Wilbur sent a cheeky grin to his brothers, hoping the glimmer of mirth in his eyes overshadowed his previous dilemma. It was a shaky attempt at easing the tension from the car, but a good one nonetheless. He could already see the flickering of a mischievous grin form on Techno’s lips, and Phil snorted from the front seat.

But there was no flustered blush on his brother’s cheeks, no playfully snarled curses promising retribution exploding from the seventeen year-old. Instead, Tommy just swiveled his head to stare at his older brother with the most venom Will had ever seen a kid muster as Tommy wrinkled his nose in anger. Wilbur’s heart stumbled and he felt dread pool in his stomach—what had happened to his baby brother?

“Yeah, sure.” Tommy muttered as he leaned forward, propping his elbows on his knees as he palmed his face. Wilbur could see Techno try not to flinch at the sudden departure of their brother’s body-heat against theirs; it was as if Tommy didn’t want to touch them, or even be near them. “Just sit at a different table, would ya?”

It felt like a rejection, and damn, did it sting like one.

“Right,” Techno drawled, “we’ll leave you high schoolers be. No need to sit with a bunch of nerds.” The tease was simple, lighthearted enough that it should have elicited a few chuckles, but it fell on deaf ears. Even Phil was silent.

*It’s okay, he was grasping at straws now, trying to reassure himself over the great wave of doubt that was crashing on his head, he’s probably just tired. Or moody - you were moody at that age, weren’t you? It’s fine. Let’s just get some food in the kid and we’ll be bickering like there’s no tomorrow. Just like old times.*

His eyes wandered to his twin’s, and he could see his own worry reflected upon an identical face.

*It’ll be fine, just give it time...*

He just had to hope that they had enough.

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading so far! Also if you could not tell, I grew up on 90s rap and r&b lol

Let me know if you have any poetry recs in the comments :)

# **“and my nights, and my doubts, and my friends/my beautiful, credible friends.”**

## Chapter Notes

Title from “All My Friends Are Finding New Beliefs” by Christian Wiman

Sorry this chapter took so long! Thank you so much to all the AMAZING people who've read, commented, and given kudos to this fic! It really means a lot to see you guys enjoying it, and all your kind words are appreciated more than you know! It's so dope to see folks like what had started off as a vent fic, and that encouraged me to keep working on it!

Thanks to all the folks who came from my other fic - I will be asking for that hand in platonic marriage now ;)

The only TW I have is for internalized ableism regarding Tubbo's dyslexia in his section, but nothing too intense! Just a heads up!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Kinoko's Coffee was nestled between a Subway and CITI Bank in the outskirts of their town's historic district. Kinoko's was a pocket of magic in the bustling world around them; the little coffee shop with a yellow-painted door that radiated warmth even when closed, its eaves dripping with garlands and dotted with fairy lights that cast a soft glow on the patio. The small red-brick pathway was dotted with bushes of irises and lavenders perched amongst porcelain mushroom sculptures and pots housing succulents, a brushstroke of color amongst canvases of sidewalk pavement. To any onlooker, the coffee shop seemed like any cottage-core fantasy created by millennial entrepreneurs, but to those with a keen eye, there were hidden secrets: scattered amongst the brush and in the nooks of the eaves were countless gnome statues, all with carefully painted smiles or frowns, always doing something out of the ordinary. There were some wrestling each other, others dancing a jig amongst themselves, and some (those of which being Tommy's favorite) were sharpening little plastic knives with red paint splattered on their front. Now that was fucking cool.

But most of all, Tommy loved the front door garden. When poetry practice ran long and he couldn't stand to sit and talk rhyme schemes a moment longer, the garden had become his place of respite. He would crouch by the hydrangeas and watch as moths circled the fairy-lights above like predators drawn to prey, their thin wings obscuring the light as it danced upon the pavement below; it was as if nothing existed but him and the cyclone of insects hovering above his head, as if he was the sole inheritor of a little universe constructed just for him to observe. This, the quaint coffee shop with its garden and little mysteries, was a place where he could finally catch a breath from life's chaos.

(Sometimes, it felt like it was the only place he *could* breathe)

Tommy pushed the yellow door open to the giggling of a window chime above him, alerting the shop owners of a new customer. Instantly the aroma of freshly ground coffee and frothing milk washed over him, alleviating the tension in his shoulders from the car-ride here. God, he loved this place. He grinned as he made eye contact with the owner across the room, giving the man a little wave and shuffling inside.

“Hey! T-Man! Nice to see you back,” the brunette cheered, his large bifocals threatening to slip off his nose as he practically jumped onto the counter to greet him. If Tommy had to explain Karl Jacobs in one word, owner and best barista of Kinoko’s Coffee, he would have to say ‘peculiar’. The man was honest-to-God one of the wackiest people Tommy had met (and he was friends with Tubbo for Christ’s sake); he was a mess of clumsy hands and run-on sentences, words always getting away from him as he chattered a customer’s ear off, or told tales of impossible places and even more impossible people. When he wasn’t rambling, his head was in the clouds, staring off at odd spaces and muttering to himself about books and doppelgängers. It was strange, but no one paid any mind to the strange things about Karl—there was enough to last a life-time.

(Like how no one knew where the dude had come from, not really. It was like one day the shop had just popped up with owner in tow, replacing the beloved seafood restaurant the town had grown to love. No explanation, no preface, just a new spark of magic laid amongst city buildings like a firefly on grass—unassuming)

“Hey Karl! How’s the fiancé holding up?” Tommy leaned against the counter, sincerely curious as to how Sapnap was doing; the man had an incident with some fireworks (which were *definitely not* illegal, the man was *totally* not a pyromaniac or anything) in Dream’s backyard. “I heard that the burns weren’t too bad?”

Karl hummed, already a flurry of cups and tea-bags as he began to make Tommy his usual order, “he’s fine, just a bit grumpy that George and I banned him from illicit activities for the foreseeable future. Driving him absolutely crazy out of boredom.”

Tommy winced in sympathy, and gave a solemn nod. “Ah, yes, the throes of boredom. More painful than a second degree burn.” He watched as Karl poured his tea into a cup of warm milk, stirring the two together with a delicate hand, as if guiding thread through a loom. Karl’s barista skills were an art form within itself—no matter how forgetful the man could be, he never, *ever*, got an order wrong. “Will he be healed in time for the wedding?”

“Oh, for sure. We thought about pushing it back a few months but he said the burn scars would look ‘dope as hell’,” Karl drawled, scrunching his nose at his imitation of Sapnap’s words before breaking into a smile, “but the date’s still set for July. You’ll be there?”

There was the clatter of the wind-chime behind him, and Tommy determinedly ignored the sound of three pairs of feet shuffling in. “Yeah, I should be! I’m still working on what to wear—Mr. Sam said he’d take me suit shopping though.”

“Who’s taking you suit shopping, mate?” His father’s voice sounded over his shoulder, and Tommy held back a full-bodied grimace. Right. His father didn’t know about the wedding (*or*



*about Karl at all*, that voice of his whispered unhelpfully, *and surely not about your relationship with Mr. Sam*), or that Tommy needed a suit to go. He hadn't ever planned on telling his father, to be honest, he had enough birthday and holiday money to pay for the suit himself, and he was sure that Mr. Sam would help him figure out to do his tie and everything. Plus, the man had already promised to be Tommy and his plus one's transportation for the night.

*That's a father's job*, he found himself frowning, *a father is supposed to teach you how to knot a tie and how to slip cuff-links through button holes*.

"Why do you need a suit, Toms?" Wilbur chimed in, sliding into the space on Tommy's right and casually placing his elbow on Tommy's shoulder, tilting his head at Karl. Tommy stiffened from the contact. "What, got some fancy school dance to attend?"

Karl opened his mouth to respond by Tommy cut him off with a quick, "none of your business." His older brother blinked in owlish surprise as Tommy pulled away from his touch, lips pressing into a thin line. Tommy tried to ignore the sharpness in his chest at the reaction, placing his crumpled dollar bills into Karl's hand to pay for his drink; why would he care if Wilbur was upset with him or not?

Sure, he was being a bit more cold than entirely necessary towards the elder (no, not cold, his anger and hurt were *burning*), but the car-ride to the cafe had been like walking on eggshells...if the egg shells were made of glass and on fire, that is. Wilbur had tried to make casual conversation, about what classes he wanted to take next year and if he was nervous for senior year, while Techno had done nothing more than make pointed observations about Tommy's clothes ("I see you're still wearing the same t-shirt and jeans since middle school," Techno's voice had been too dry for humor), his hair, his expressions, nitpicking everything about him until he felt pink and raw from eyes on his skin.

Now as Karl passed him a his usual order of a London Fog, large, with two extra spoonfuls of sugar, its warmth stinging upon the pads of his fingertips, he realized that his brothers knew practically nothing about him. Not really. They knew his age, that he still liked video games and despised exercise, but they didn't *know* him. They didn't know that he still remembered how to play a few songs from eavesdropping on Will's old piano lessons, that he had re-memorized the entire periodic table and each element's properties every year just so he could make sense of Tubbo's late-night ramblings over text, that he was still scared of the dark and walking home alone (that he did it anyway when the night fell), or that he spent every weekend surrounded by poets, some almost ten years his former, each one just as brilliant as the next.

(He was scared of them knowing, of them *knowing him* as he really was. Would they miss the child they had left behind? Blame him for doing-away with the whiny brat with big blue eyes and gapped teeth?)

And so it was true, wasn't it? It wasn't any of Wilbur's business to be monitoring the Tommy's behavior, ask where he was going or why—he had rescinded that duty when he moved away to London. The same went for Techno as well; the prodigy had given away any claim to Tommy's good graces when he had boarded that plane for a prestigious-ass school in Massachusetts and never looked back.

*These are Big Thoughts, Tubbo would say, and sometimes, you gotta leave the Big Thoughts for the page, man. The rest of us can't keep up.*

Right. Tubbo and Ranboo; he needed to find a place for them to sit, probably somewhere with a big enough table in case Ranboo decided to bring their materials for his upcoming summer debate tournament (ugh, what a nerd, doing academic extracurriculars during *summer?*), or if Tubbo was struck by inspiration and wanted to sketch his robotics blueprints on the corner of a napkin. Gosh, *both* of his friends were total geeks, always chattering together about recent developments in technology and coding. Well, he guessed he was a ‘geek’ too, spending their lunch-break showing the other two his annotations and workshop notes, quoting lines in the middle of a conversation when relevant (despite Tubbo’s protests that “references to Percy Bysshe Shelley are never relevant, *ever*”).

“See you later Karl,” he smiled, the cheer in his voice now less syrupy and more sincere as he took a sip of his drink. *Perfect, as always*, “give Sapnap my regards.” Behind him, his family swayed anxiously, glaringly out of place, silent as the bespectacled barista gave a little wave and watery smile.

“I’ll catch you at your next refill, Big Man. Just make sure you don’t max out the limit Puffy has set for you this week, or she’ll have my head.”

Something warm flickered in the hollows of his stomach at that, and he didn’t think it was the drink he was nursing. Regardless of how much he pretended to throw a fit about it, knowing that Puffy was meticulously checking his caffeine intake...it made him feel nice.

“Right, gotcha Mr. Jacobs.” He grinned teasingly, turning back to his task and brushing past his bewildered family members. The initial excitement of showing his friends the cafe, his safe space, returned in full force; he wanted them to love it as much as he did, wanted them to find a home here too, amongst the garden gnomes and softly lit enclaves of sprawling bookshelves and bean-bag chairs. There was a flutter in his chest, and his smile widened as he situated himself at a large, round table surrounded by chairs with velvet upholstery, fit for three.

*No need to be nervous; this is going to be perfect.*

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Tubbo wasn’t nervous per se, rather, he was just worried. He wasn’t worried about if he’d have a good time with his two best friends, or if he’d like the nitro-brew at this cute joint Tommy had taken them to (and he had to admit, it was pretty adorable)—he was worried about *Tommy*. This in itself wasn’t unusual: Tubbo spent more time than necessary fretting about his best friend, whether it be his pre-calc grade or what mischief the younger was getting up to during passing period, Tubbo was always keeping a keen eye on the blonde.

(Ranboo liked to tease him that he was like a mother hen, or that he babied Tommy too much, but Tubbo didn’t mind. If he had to step into the Mom Friend role sometimes to make sure his best friend was alright, he would do so without hesitation)

So, of course Tubbo was worried when he had gotten a text in the group chat from Tommy saying his father was dropping him off. Despite the fact that the two had been friends for

almost four years, sharing countless hours of laughter squeezed between discord study-sessions and coursework, Tommy never spoke much about his family. Still, Tubbo knew that his best friend's relationship with his father was strained at best and neglectful at worst; there were clues, in poorly timed jokes and off-hand comments, in the way Tommy's shoulders would ride up to his ears as he shrugged to say *my father won't be home till late, so he won't care if I go out*, how he was constantly checking his grades online to monitor the slightest change, his practically-empty lunch boxes of junk-food that had Ranboo and Tubbo sneaking healthy snacks into the teen's backpack throughout the school day. And of course Tubbo had seen the lines, the countless scribbles of poetry in the margins of Tommy's paper or on sticky-notes that hinted at a bitter picture, with an empty house and lonely boy.

(And then there was That Night, when Tommy had picked up after his fifth missed call, voice thick from sobbing, asking, no - *begging* Tubbo to tell him why everyone had left him. Tubbo couldn't answer such an impossible question, couldn't do more than sit on his kitchen counter until 3am, swinging his legs as he told Tommy all the reasons he was worth staying for)

Yeah. It was safe to say that when Tubbo had gotten that text, he was pretty 'worried'.

Now, approaching Tommy's table with nitro-brew in hand and a carefully painted smile on his face, he felt the nerves begin to melt away as Tommy flashed his friends a grin brighter than anything the Hubble Telescope could hope to capture. There was something about Tommy that unstabilized the oxygen in the air, made everything feel electric and combustible. Maybe it was the way his laughter echoed in even the smallest room, how he was able to draw even Ranboo out of their shell, how Tommy's poetry wove itself into everyday conversation, delicate words suddenly drawing out a sensitive, thoughtful side of his friend he had never seen before—whatever it was, it made Tubbo feel like the air was alight.

"Tubso! Ranboob! Thank God you finally showed up, I've practically already finished my drink languishing in boredom! I had to buy a muffin to keep me company!" The blonde had draped himself across the velvet chair he had been perched in, the back of his hand pressed to his forehead like a fainted lady. Tubbo rolled his eyes, sinking heavily in his chair as he tore off a piece of said muffin and popped it in his mouth to Tommy's cries off, "oy, dickhead!"

"You couldn't have been that bored," Ranboo said wryly, nodding at the scraps of paper lying upon the table, covered in doodles of Disney characters (mostly from *Up*) and crooked stanzas alike. Tubbo snorted at Tommy's growing embarrassment, watching as his friend straightened himself and crossed his arms petulantly like a child.

"Well, a Big Man like me can find ways to intellectually stimulate his mind. It's just your guys' fault for being so late that I had to get creative."

"Tommy, we are literally on time, you just got here early—"

"Excuses!" He crowed in a perfect rendition of their sophomore year chemistry teacher, sending all three boys into a fit of giggles. Already, Tubbo could feel the dense weight of anxiety in his stomach lighten, and he found a smile splaying across his face as he bantered with his two best friends. There was nothing like this, being surrounded by the two people who made life just a bit more bearable, a bit more vibrant.

But there was still the lingering tang of unease in the air, mixing with the richness of ground coffee. Tommy's eyes were darting to somewhere over Tubbo's shoulders, kept glistening something indiscernible as he gazed at whatever was bothering him (and Tubbo had a sneaking suspicion he knew what, rather *whom*, Tommy was eyeing). Whatever. Tubbo would worry about that later; for the sake of Tommy, who was excitedly chattering about the coffee shop's nooks and crannies, he'd let it slide.

"Oh! Ranboo! How'd that last tournament go?" Tommy asked as Ranboo reached over to break off a piece of the blue-berry muffin they had been sharing. Tubbo plucked the bite out of Ranboo's hand, who just sighed as Tubbo chewed smugly.

(There was an elephant in the room and everyone knew it. Tommy kept looking to the side, Ranboo was anxiously tapping his nails on the wooden table, and Tubbo...he was just trying to keep the peace from falling apart)

"I placed fifth out of seventy in Extemporaneous Speaking, so I'm pretty happy with that. Coach wasn't too excited about how we placed in Duos, but...uh, Purpled was *not* in the mood this week. Can't blame him, though, it was like, 7am."

"What about Hannah's Dramatic Interpretation? I know Tommy gave her tips on the poetry recitation section?" Tubbo took a sip of his cold nitro-brew and found it empty. He suck out his tongue in disappointment.

Tommy hummed, "yeah, we workshopped that for a bit, she was struggling with tone. I mean, Shakespeare can be a hard one to feel out."

"Oh! Uh, good I think? I'm not too knowledgeable about Dramatic, but I think it went well. She actually, uh, wanted to talk to you more about performance poetry, sometime?" At that Tommy brightened, launching into a long-winded tangent about the potential Hannah Rose had to become a slam poet, about his team and how he could hook her up with Puffy's info to introduce her to the scene. Tubbo nodded along good naturally; to be honest, he wasn't all that into the whole poetry thing Tommy had going on, couldn't stand the idea of willingly spending your time reading pretentious bullshit for fun, but he knew Tommy loved it. And so he smiled and listened to Tommy's ideas on the Romantics, laughing at sly remarks about love poems and asking him questions about slam poetry lingo.

*My brain isn't one made for metaphors or pretty words*, he would think, but feel the tumble of warmth in his belly anyway as Tommy showed him his favorite poem, or texted him a stanza that particularly reminded him of Tubbo. That, the surge of excitement in his chest as his friend read aloud his work, made Tubbo wish sometimes that he could do what Tommy did. No, it wasn't jealousy, but it was something else, something that coiled in his gut and latched onto his diaphragm. *I'm not built for poetry* he'd laugh, and pretend that it didn't bother him. And it didn't, really; he wasn't afraid Tommy was going to leave him behind for another friend who could make art out of language just as the blonde could, that could understand all the similes and didn't stumble while reading because the words wouldn't lay still. He wasn't afraid that this new safe-haven Tommy had found, the coffee shop with a cutesy aesthetic and staff that all knew his order by heart, wasn't the tip of a wedge that was splitting them apart.

Okay, so maybe it did bother him just a little bit.

Tubbo gripped his drink tighter. No, nothing was driving them apart, Tubbo was just being dramatic. He was letting that familiar inadequacy, what he tried so hard to chase away with each Science Olympiad tournament and AP class he took, get to him. Tommy wasn't going to leave him because his dyslexia. He had never treated Tubbo different because of his learning disability—instead of making jokes at his expense, the boy laughed good-naturedly at every 'shut the fuck up I can't read' quip Tubbo threw his way, never babying him, never underestimating him—and he had always made sure Tubbo knew he was just as capable as anyone else, regardless if it took him longer to get through the lit homework.

So yeah, Tubbo would listen to his friend ramble about poetry for a few minutes. Despite everything, this he could do—give Tommy the space to be completely himself around Tubbo and Ranboo. Because if that was all he could do, then he would do so without complaint.

(Because Tommy had done the same, and Tubbo would never forget it)

“So, how'd picking up your brothers go?” Ranboo was the first to broach the topic that had been determinedly swept under the rug with each witty remark and round of laughter. By the grimace overtaking Tommy's features, it was an unwelcome subject change. “Not good, I assume.”

Tommy gave a shrug, swirling the last dashes of London Fog in his cup as he avoided the others' eyes. “It was...awkward. Damn early too. I had to sit in the back with Wilbur and Techno which was, eh, it was alright. The rough part was the stupid questions,” his voice pitched upwards, nose scrunching up as he said mockingly, “*oh Tommy! How's high-school been? Are you still wasting time with video games all day?* It's like...like they don't want to even acknowledge that I haven't spoken to either of them in years! All this stupid small-talk and 'catching up' stuff—it's not my speed.”

Tubbo's heart clenched painfully, and he shot Tommy a watery smile. “It sounds like they want to re-connect with you! That's not so bad.” Ranboo was quick to nod, humming in agreement with Tubbo as he continued, “it's just growing pains, y'know? An adjustment period.”

The younger shrugged again, a frown twisting on his lips as his eyes shifted to the side, stuck upon something Tubbo couldn't see. “I guess so, it just felt so...you know when you're at a family reunion or dinner or something? And there's that one relative that you always see on the outskirts of the party and the only time they ever come up to you is to talk about how much you've grown since they last saw you? And they're so familiar, like you *know* them, they come up to you every time and you *know* the routine, but at the end of the day they're just a stranger who shares a last name with you? It felt like that, like it was just two strangers sitting in the backseat with me.”

There was nothing left afterwards but silence. And what could one say to that admission, what reassurance could Tubbo possibly provide?

“Tommy...”

“I just - it's fine. I don't want to...it's just Big Thoughts, innit?” Tommy gave a wry smile, as if the words were a joke between friends and not a dismissal. That was the thing about

Tommy: he was always trying to wrap up his emotions in language he understood, always trying to pretty his thoughts until they were so far removed from the wound that it was just a remnant of what had been. Tubbo understood somewhat; he was a scientist, he believed everything was merely data to be analyzed and applied, every human a conglomeration of various cells that built upon each other into well oiled systems, but the thing about systems is that they required maintenance. If his friend wasn't maintaining his 'emotional system', ensuring his neurons fired adequately and routinely...

Tubbo was not one for metaphor, but he was a man of science, and he knew what occurred during a system failure. But all he could do in the face of a failure was try to stall the crash, and do his best to prepare for the fall out.

And that, he thought, watching as Ranboo eased Tommy into another discussion about the newest Mortal Kombat game mechanics, was something he could do.

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Sooner than he would have liked, Tubbo and Ranboo had to leave ("Sadly, debate practice waits for no man," Ranboo had chuckled apologetically, and Tommy had punched them on the shoulder), and Tommy was once again in the backseat of his father's car on his way home. True to their word, the rest of the Watson family hadn't approached the trio of teenagers throughout breakfast, watching from afar as the three fluctuated between explosive bickering (mostly Tommy shouting profanities at Ranboo for existing), and quiet, strained moments where Tommy had felt his throat clog and eyes water.

As they said their goodbyes with quick hugs and last minute quips, he had been pulled aside by Tubbo, who gave him a stern talking to. *At least try to give your brothers a chance, okay?* The shorter brunette had frowned slightly as Tommy avoided his gaze, but pressed on, *I get that it's...hard, but I think they really want to connect with you. And I think you want to, too. Just...try, alright? For me?*

(Tommy hadn't done more than cringe, but he had managed a small nod in response to his best friend's plea, and how could he not? Tubbo's face had lit up with a hope so precarious Tommy was afraid a falling raindrop would shatter it entirely)

Tommy squirmed from where he was squished in the middle seat between his two older brothers. On his left, Techno had completely knocked out as the plane ride caught up to him, mouth open in a snore and head leant against the window, rocking softly with each pothole Phil tried his best to avoid but hit anyway. On his right, eyes heavy with bags and blinking away exhaustion in an effort to adjust his internal clock to the west coast, Wilbur had plugged his ears with headphones and hummed along to whatever was playing as he watched the world speed past through his window. Tommy couldn't help but stare at his brother, taking in his appearance in full for the first time in eight years—not a lot had changed, he still had that ridiculously styled hair that fell into a cloud above his forehead and silver-wired glasses—but his face had leaned out, done away with its childish glow, and now there were smile lines imprinted near his mouth and a worry line between his brows. His brother had aged, and the realization held him captive in his breathlessness; his brother was here, actually here, after eight years, and he had become an adult. A man.

Wilbur's eyes flickered something indiscernible as he stared out the window, and he turned to meet Tommy's gaze. They sat there like that for a moment, for an entirety, for a heartbeat, eyes latched on the other as if he would disappear into mist. Then, as the world around them fell into stasis and Techno's snores eased into quiet huffs of breath, Wilbur took out his right earbud and extended it towards his younger brother.

Tommy didn't move.

*(I think they really want to connect with you...Just...try, alright? For me?)*

He reached for the earbud, placing it gently in his ear. Wilbur shot him a small smile, and Tommy leaned back against the carseat, enjoying the tender strumming of guitar and low croons in the hollow of his ear as they drove, car shivering from potholes and speed-bumps as the afternoon sun climbing higher and higher into the sky until it sent beams of light through the windshield, casting warmth upon the three brothers.

And so they sat like that, shoulders barely touching but joined by a thin-white chord and whatever music the pair of headphones brought, this small bridge that was so close to breaking away into nothing but held them nonetheless. Wilbur's eyes had slid shut and, despite his older brother's best efforts, his breathing had evened out with sleep—Tommy felt a smile curl at the corners of his lips.

*(And I think you want to, too)*

His phone buzzed, and at first he didn't want to check it, afraid of ruining this moment that felt as fragile as a flower's petal under his thumb, but Wilbur's eyes were still closed and answering a text wasn't going to change that fact, so he glanced down at the LED screen. Dread curled in his stomach at the black text in front of him:

REMINDER - THURS. OPEN MIC W/DREAM 9PM!!!GROUP POEM!!!

*FIND A RIDE!*

## Chapter End Notes

they/he Ranboo pog. also the song I imagine Tommy and Wilbur listening to in the car is "Agoraphobia" by Autoheart if u want to check that out!

take care!

# "I do the very thing I hate...I do not do/the good I want."

## Chapter Notes

Title from "Eating Dust" by Joyce S. Brown

Thank you so much everyone for your lovely comments ahhh! Y'all are so kind, and I am absolutely STOKED that so many people are looking into slam now ahhhh!!! I promise I see and read each one, even if I don't respond! Unfortunately, my brain would not let me answer all the comments until I published another chapter, so imma go back through all of them to catch the ones I missed as soon as this is up lol.

TWs for yelling and familiar arguments in the first section, and discussions of poor mental health and self-destructive habits (vaguely mentioned) in the last section. Stay safe!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy had changed. This, in itself, was admittedly not a very astute observation, or any news either. However, Technoblade was a researcher—his profession was one of inquiry and the following trial and error, of questions and their results—and so, he would start with the basics.

Tommy had changed, not only physically but assumedly mentally as well, over these past seven or eight years. While Techno might not be able to discern the evolution of the latter, just by the metric of height he could see how time had passed. The kid had shot up like a bean-pole, looming over Technoblade who stood at a somewhat frustrating 5'10", and tall enough to reach Wilbur's eye-line. When the teenager had first slid out of the SUV to help them load their bags at the airport terminal, Technoblade had briefly been unable to recognize his little brother (and he was unable to ignore the lurch in his gut at that realization, that all it took was a glance to cement the fact his brother had become someone unfamiliar). Sure, there were still the dew-drop blue eyes (though they were now speared with pinpricks of grey), there was the tufts of blonde hair and barking laughter that silenced all other sound waves hovering, but it all felt like nothing more than residue from a childhood Technoblade had missed. He knew that Will saw it too, from the way his twin's eyes lingered on the teenager's blonde head of hair from their seats in the corner of the coffee shop, how he straightened his spine when Tommy passed as if to say *I am still taller than you, that, at the least, will remain.*

And sure, Wilbur was being petty, and sure, Techno was being stupid in thinking his little brother would go unchanged in eight years, but who could blame him? No matter how old he got, how he outgrew the heights penciled in on the kitchen wall, how he had returned to a stranger in the place of his little brother, this home and its inhabitants would always remain unchanged in his mind. There would always be the creaky step on the back porch and garage door that jammed; there would always be a father with a kind smile and kinder touch who



made hot chocolate after nightmares, the brothers who kept him up at night with unrehearsed bedroom concerts and too-loud laughter; there would always be his childhood hidden in the details.

(But what happened when you left that childhood behind?)

Technoblade was an academic—he was not used to being out of his depth.

So he started with the basics, observing his little brother for any sign of change beyond the physical, analyzing every twitch of his hand and worry line upon his forehead. As he watched the boy interact with his friends at Kinokos, straining his ears to overhear the teens' conversation, he had come to two conclusions:

One—Tommy and Phil were not close, or at the very least, were currently in a spat. The boy had determinedly ignored his family as he chatted up the barista and sat with his friends; it made sense for him to be wary around Wilbur and Techno, they hadn't seen the properly gremlin in seven years give or take, and of course he would need time to acclimate to his brothers' new personalities that came with adulthood, but there was no reason for him to be so jumpy around Phil. The two had lived in that house by themselves for years—they would've been each other's only company after Wilbur moved out and took his charisma with him—it didn't make sense for Phil to look as though Tommy was the son he was seeing for the first time in almost a decade. Not to mention, Tommy's friends barely registered Phil's existence in the first place when they brushed past—that was not normal. Parents should know their child's friends, or at least recognize their names, and friends were meant to be politely introduced and well welcomed. And so that lead Techno to his next conclusion:

Two—Tommy was hiding something. Whatever it was, it was something that Phil apparently knew nothing about, and something he wasn't inclined to share with the family. And Techno would be damned if he didn't find out what.

Similar to Wilbur, he had tried to look over Tommy's shoulder to see if maybe the teen's iPhone would provide some answers, but had found himself disappointed as the teen did nothing more than scroll through instagram, liking photos of classmates at beaches and amusement parks, and the few odd celebrities promoting some useless product that either contained too much sugar or flashed too many LEDs. So, resigned to learning nothing new about Tommy's supposed secret, Techno had finally given himself up to the confines of a restless sleep in his father's beat-up Ford. That, at least, had been familiar.

Now, as the family began to settle back into their roles that had once been second nature, dusting off old routines with bedside tables and untouched door-knobs, Techno couldn't help but find himself restless at all this uncertainty. He would be the first to admit he didn't do well with unknowns—despite his assertions that he craved independence, moving out had still been the hardest thing he'd ever done, regardless of the monthly care-packages Phil sent like clockwork or nightly texts from his twin—and this entire situation was One Big Unknown that he couldn't quite grasp. So, he did what he did best: go back to the basics.

Setting his bags down in his childhood bedroom (which, thankfully, hadn't changed much. He didn't know what he would do if he found out if the little gremlin had trashed it while he was gone), he tried to pick up from where he had left off. The room had been stripped

practically bare when he moved out, and was coated in a thickening layer of dust, as if it had all gone untouched for years—that would not do. He got to work, cleaning the surface of his desk and shelving his countless books, hanging up the clothes he packed with him in his closet until it looked a little less empty and a little more like the organized chaos he was used to.

*(It will not be enough, the coy voice of his subconscious would hiss with each cardigan clung loose on a plastic hanger, you cannot pretend to go back to a foundation that has already been torn up. He ignored that one, instead focusing on the other thoughts bouncing around his skull, like why the hell had he thought it necessary to pack an East coast coat for West coast weather)*

And so went the next two hours until Phil called them down for an early dinner, his consciousness split in between the nostalgia at being surrounded by the echoes of his youth and the curiosity picking at his brain like a fresh scab (and it wasn't curiosity, not quite. It was a desperation to *know*, to understand who he was in this new dynamic surfacing). Still, by the time he was making his way down the set of stairs leading into the kitchen, he could feel his spine ease out of its practiced posture and into a relaxed hunch, content with the progress made in bringing comfort back into his thread-bare room, making it a bit more homey.

(Even if the act felt hollow; him and Will weren't planning on staying that long, an unspoken secret passed between side-eyed glances when their father wasn't looking, there was no legitimate reason to re-make a *home* out of this house).

Dinner, to put simply, was a dismal affair. The tension from the car-ride home had not dissipated over the course of a few hours, and it showed in every stilted attempt at conversation and long silence pregnant with unease. Despite the meal being a family favorite—grilled salmon over dirty rice and speared potatoes, a welcome release from the dining hall food Techno had grown used to—the table's spirits were low at best and nonexistent at worst. If he was being honest, there was one main culprit: Tommy.

The teenager apparently wanted nothing to do with his fellow housemates, going as far as to pull out his phone at the table (which was a big no-no of Phil's). Even Wilbur's efforts to drag the boy into a lively discussion about sand and "other forms of sustenance" (his twins words exactly; it was somewhat unfortunate he was the only one who formed brain cells in the womb) fell flat, the boy doing nothing more than staring blankly at his brother before shrugging and returning to his food and whatever was entrancing him on that little screen.

Whatever. That was fine: Techno was a patient man, and he could stand an awkward dinner or two before he got to the bottom of what was going on in this house.

"Tommy, what are you looking at?"

Wilbur, it seemed, was not.

Despite being his twin, there were many things about Wilbur that always had and always will confuse Techno. Like how the man had a natural affinity for the arts that Techno lacked, how he was able to find music in the most uncanny places (the sound of laundry tumbling in the

dryer machine, footsteps on pavement, rustling bags and whining backyard fences); like how the man was quite literally incapable of thinking before he spoke. Screaming matches between Wilbur and Phil had been common throughout their household, and it was more than common to find the then-teenager shuffling into his family member's bedrooms with a late-night apology in hand and tears in his eyes. Techno didn't get it, not really—he didn't know how someone could lose control like that, was afraid of what it meant if he ever found out—but he was Wilbur's brother, and so he tried. He took each mumbled apology in stride, easy to forgive his twin's lashing tongue and even more stinging silent-treatment; he didn't voice his concerns when, after moving out and creating a new sanctuary out of a dorm room in Massachusetts, Wilbur stopped returning his calls and blocked his texts. He just sighed, waited for Wilbur to come back with an apology, and continued on.

He may not understand his brother, but he *knew* him. And that was enough.

But apparently, he didn't know why for the *ever-loving-fuck* Wilbur had decided to antagonize their little brother.

"What?" Tommy's eyes tore away from whatever they had been pinned upon, blinking owlishly as he stared at Wilbur. "I...sorry, what?"

Wilbur let sounded something shrill, a whine exploding from the back of his throat as he motioned at Tommy with his fork in frustration. "Your phone! You've been staring at it all dinner—what are you looking at?"

Tommy's head jerked backwards as if he had been slapped, and he looked momentarily caught off guard before he straightened his posture, scowling. "Why is what I'm lookin' at on my phone any of your business, dickhead?"

"Boys," Phil began, but was quickly interrupted by the sound of Wilbur dropping his fork to his plate with a *clang*, elbows propped on the table as he leaned closer to stare at the blonde across from him. Techno sighed. *It's Wilbur Tantrum Time, right on schedule.*

"It's my business when you spend all day looking at it like it's the Holy Grail. And, oh, I don't know, maybe when you are *literally avoiding talking to your brothers who you haven't seen in a few years?*"

"It's none of your business," Tommy repeated, gritting his teeth as he clicked his phone off and set it face down on the table, "and it's nothing important anyways. Trust me, you wouldn't think it was interesting."

Wilbur snorted, dark eyes flashing with something that Techno had long wished he could forget. Of course, it was all only a matter of time; with the old routines came the rusted, sullied bits that they had all tried so hard to bury away with each packed bag and boarded plane. Techno knew Wilbur wasn't trying to be mean, Phil knew that, Will knew that as well, deep down (and hopefully Tommy did too), but Wilbur didn't react well to being told there was something he wasn't allowed to know. They were similar in that way.

"Well, it must be important enough to occupy all your attention. And maybe I would think it's interesting, you ever thought of that? I could totally be interested in whatever is on your

phone!” Wilbur was saying. Then, more bitter: “Come on, dude, at least pretend to be enjoying spending time with us.”

“Well, maybe you could at least pretend to be enjoyable!”

“Oh, you little *brat*—“

Something in Tommy’s gaze flickered (something steeled and sharpened like a blade, something dangerous, something Techno had never seen in his brother’s eyes before), and his lips twisted into a snarl. He opened his mouth to speak, to probably say something foul that would leave Techno’s ears ringing for hours at the sheer volume of it, but he was interrupted by Phil clearing his throat, silencing the two bickering boys in front of him. Techno wouldn’t lie, it was impressive how effective it was.

Next to him, Techno could hear Phil’s breath become tight with exasperation, their father reaching over to place a placating hand on Wilbur’s forearm and sending Tommy a pointed look. “Boys,” he said again, voice heavy in weariness, “no fighting, not on the first day back. Wilbur, please respect your brother’s privacy and Tommy, put your phone away. It’s rude—I thought I taught you better than that.”

Wilbur huffed and pulled his arm away from their father’s hold, looking miffed but nothing more, nothing less. Tommy on the other hand physically recoiled, eyes shining with fury, the lightning before a thunder-clap; Techno had rarely seen his brother *that* angry. It was an emotion reserved for stolen DS cartridges and missed-sleepovers, but never for family, never for Dad (and what had happened between the old man and the kid? What had happened that Tommy felt so comfortable turning a burning glare upon their father?), and not one suited for a domestic spat over dinner.

Again, was that uncertainty; again was that stranger.

“Sorry Dad, sorry Tommy.” Wilbur muttered, following due course towards the resolution of tonight’s Wilbur Tantrum. Phil loosed a sigh and turned to the youngest hopefully, a nervous smile on his face as he waited to hear whatever would come from the teen’s mouth. When it seemed like nothing was to be uttered, Phil gave a firm, “Tommy.”

“Fine! Fine, I’m sorry...” he groaned, leaning back in his chair as he glowered up at his brother. Techno raised an eyebrow—that was easier than expected, “that you’re a massive prick.” Okay well it wasn’t that easy then. *And there’s that clap of thunder.*

Phil squeezed his eyes shut, and the crows-feet near his temple became more pronounced. “Tommy, go to your room or apologize, please.”

Tommy’s smirk promptly fell off his face, and his mouth fell open in a gaping *are you kidding me?* The teen continued to splutter, face screwed up and cheeks puffing his indignation as if he was trying to say something, but his growing frustration left him speechless and spitting at Phil’s stony expression. Techno waited for the cursing, for the loud-mouthed boy he had grown up with to rear his ugly-head and the rain that came with a storm to begin pounding down. But as Tommy drew himself out of his chair, all gangly bones and cutting eyes, the teenager just shrugged and murmured, “whatever, see you later,” before

dashing away to his room, each step a quiet, retreating clash of thunder that grew farther and farther away until no lighting was in sight. Another break in the old routine.

And so that lead Techno to his third and final conclusion of the night—this whole ‘bonding thing’ that Wilbur had his heart set on, the last hoorah before Tommy applied for college and this house became nothing more than a museum to left-over memories, before they told Phil and Tommy the *true* reason they were visiting...

Well, it was going to be a hell of a lot harder than they thought.

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The first word out of Tommy’s mouth when he shut his bedroom door was *fuck*. That entire dinner was a circus, one of water-drenched clowns and prowling lions and whips. He hadn’t fought with anyone like that in a while—there was no reason to: Phil was always gone, and Tubbo didn’t take that crap and made sure Ranboo didn’t either. So maybe a bit of it was pent up energy he needed to expel, nerves that were still alight with worry over this open-mic and his brothers’ sudden arrival, but still, he didn’t know why he had gotten so defensive when Wilbur had asked about his phone. It wasn’t even that big of a deal, Wilbur was just being an ass and trying to get up in his business, but *God*, when he had heard Wilbur’s condescendingly call him a ‘brat’ had just gotten *so angry*. He had felt like he felt as though the entire room had been awash with electricity, that he was a collared dog chained to a fence, all snapping teeth and raised hackles. Sure, he had gotten pissed at his family before (heck, his childhood memories were mostly of him and Wilbur having a row of some sort), but a fury like that had been hard to come by these past few years.

(That was a lie. Of course there was sophomore year, where he was less chained dog and more cornered wolf, a thing of fangs and claws, that bit everyone who came near and almost ruined every friendship he had. The year where he couldn’t stand the sight of this empty house and so he had decided that he would destroy everything within it, including himself)

But hey, it wasn’t his fault! Wilbur was being a prick, and he was being nosy, so of course Tommy had every right to retaliate. And who was Phil to think he could send Tommy to his room? Who was this stranger to act as if he had been home everyday after school, as if he had cooked dinners every night without fail, as if he had any right to scold Tommy like he was still eight years old and not the senior in high school that he was? That was bullshit! It wasn’t his fault that he had entered the dinner with that creature clawing at his throat, howling to get out, that all it took was one wrong word from his big brother for it to bare teeth. It wasn’t his fault, *it wasn’t*.

(He tried to ignore the voice in his head that reminded him he was indeed responsible for the fall out of his actions, even if it was a knee-jerk reaction. Why the hell did the morally-sound part of him have to sound so much like Tubbo?)

His body shook, hands fidgeting at his sides as he paced the room, looking for an outlet for all this excess energy. He felt like a pressurized can, one puncture hole from exploding into bits of tin and toxins, and dimly he wondered if he should write this down. Puffy always said that writing was a good way to decompress after an emotional experience, and heck, his best poetry was always ones in the aftermath of whatever had ruined his day, but it just felt too *raw*, too much. There were too many thoughts, too many metaphors swirling around in his head

in an attempt to pin it down to language: hurricanes snapping telephone wires, shattering plates, things that were combustible and things that were too heavy to float, all of it was crashing down upon him. He couldn't think beyond the images bombarding him, beyond the itch on his palms and ache under his knuckles to *write* but inability to pick up a pen. He couldn't do it.

He couldn't do anything but pace the length of his room, shaking out his hands and muttering lines of poems he had once read, all haphazard and fragmented. He needed to calm down, needed to get that monstrous anger out of him before it began to *destroy everything again*. He forced himself to sit at his desk, flicking on his trusty overhead light and prying open his government textbook—at least he could put all this excess energy into doing his summer homework, even if he hated it. He just...couldn't write right now, not while he was still feeling Like This.

(*Processing, you're processing*, a voice that sounded a bit too much like Mr. Sam for comfort hummed reassuringly, *just give your hands and brain something to do. You can always write later*).

Right. Processing. That he could do. He just needed to process (whatever the fuck that meant anyway), then he could go back to focusing on his poetry and the upcoming open-mic, go back to his little world of similes and ghazals. Hurriedly, he flipped the pages of his textbook until he found the appropriate page number and header—GERRYMANDERING & VOTERS' RIGHTS—he didn't need Wilbur or Techno or Phil to try to butt into his life again, because he didn't care what they thought or wanted. Wilbur's adamant need for his attention and Techno's cool indifference was just another fixture of his life he had to adapt and overcome. He didn't owe them an answer to what he was doing or who he was, didn't need to give them access to his life again, because he *didn't care*.

Downstairs he could hear feet shuffling and the sound of plates being washed and dried. There was the murmur of voices, some raised, some horribly quiet, and he couldn't help the tumble of his stomach. He gripped his pen tighter, the ballpoint-tip hovering over the lined paper as he hesitated, glancing blindly at the textbook, before pressing down. Hard.

But the truth was he *did* care, dangerously so; it had been practically eight years since he had last seen both his brothers together, had heard Techno's low drawl and felt Wilbur's breath flutter near his ear as he whispered a crude remark under Phil's keen eye—and he missed it. Tommy missed all the things that came with brotherhood—popsicle-soaked t-shirts and running through sprinklers, kicked shins under kitchen tables and misplaced laundry, shared blankets and popcorn bowls, laughter, so much of it that he thought his heart would burst from the euphoria charging through his veins—all the images he had tried so hard to lock away under metaphors about street cars and tight-ropes. He didn't want to admit it to himself, open up his heart again to be brutally torn and squashed upon pavement, but he missed his brothers.

Underneath his pen the ink pooled, pressure still unflinchingly being applied to the single mark he had started until it began to flood his paper, crinkling it as it soaked through the thin sheet and onto the wood of his desk.

But *God*, he was more afraid of what they would say if they found out about his poetry.

He wasn't stupid, he knew both of his brothers had a fluency for literature he had lacked up until recently—Wilbur was a musician, a poet in all meanings of the word, able to twist language to wrap around his melodies in a way that left Tommy breathless from envy, and Technoblade was a rising English professor for Christ's sake—and that they could pass accurate judgement upon his work. What would they say upon hearing his words? Would they find him worthy enough of this title 'poet' he clung to, or would they scoff at his fledgling attempts at art?

(But he was also terrified of what would happen if they *did* find him worthy, if they would look at him and the words tumbling from his mouth and onto his palms and take it willingly, eagerly. What would he do then? He wouldn't be their Little Toms anymore, of clumsy words and childish hands; with that growing up came the loss of the small, naive hope he had tried so hard to kill, that one day his brothers would see him as their little brother again, that his father would still see his little boy)

It was all so precarious. This escape, this brotherhood, all of it was teetering upon the precipice of being lost forever; slam had given him a way out, and now, it could provide his brothers a way in.

And that was more terrifying than anything he could ever imagine.

'*We cannot last forever*,' he took a measured breath, finally picking up his pen from the page as he turned the words over in his head, a line from a poem he had stowed away for a rainy day. He unsure of what exactly he was mourning, '*I loved music before I loved books. I loved Mozart before I loved you*'.

The pen clattered onto the desk as it fell from his fingers. He shut his government textbook and leaned back in his chair as he sighed, hands finally laying still from where they spasmed and arms growing heavy. There was that fear again, that whatever he had loved before poetry would be able to find its way back to him; that he would be forced to look at that growling creature housed in his throat, face to face, and he'd be forced to let it go free.

And there was that child hope, too. Still unkillable, still thrumming.

Tommy gave a wry smile, a thing too frayed with hurt and bitterness to really be considered a smile, but just fractured enough to be considered one of Tommy's. There was something to be said for a heart in conflict, something that begged to be immortalized and drawn from the abstract into tangibleness, begged to be elegized. That was the thing about being a poet he hadn't realized he signed up for:

You were always finding new ways to befriend the monsters you kept under your bed.

So he picked up a pen and got to work.

I have a love-hate relationship with this chapter: she was written entirely on a plane and on a red-eye flight, so if there's any errors I will pass the blame onto sleep deprivation. It was also so strange but so fun to write from Techno's perspective, so hopefully that turned out ok!

The poem Tommy quotes in the last few paragraphs is "Birthday" by Richie Hofmann! I'd totally check it out!

As always, take care of yourself and have an amazing day! And drop any poetry reccs you have in the comments :)



# "my darling turns to poetry at night"

## Chapter Notes

Chapter title from "My Darling Turns to Poetry at Night" by Anthony Lawrence.

ok this chapter a bit heftier and also written at 2am (so excuse any mistakes), but unfortunately that's the only time when inspiration will strike me. Also y'all are so??? nice??? and for what /pos

TWs: implied car crash and amputation and mention of firearms/guns (used in metaphor). I think that's it but lmk if I miss any!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

There was a sorcery occurring. He could feel the hum of it in the thinnest parts of his palms, where veins pressed against cracked skin and beat with the rush of his blood. His knee bounced, eagerness overtaking him as he scribbled upon the blank page, steadily filling each line with hurried pen strokes that sung of heartaches and new friends. Around him, his teammates were partaking in a similar type of magic; it was just their weekend quick write, one they did every poetry practice to get the juices flowing, but there was something in the air today. Maybe it was the way the fairy lights of Kinoko's were winking as their batteries bled, maybe it was the way the dregs of their drinks lay forgotten in the bottoms of their cups, aromas wafting in the air and tangling amongst each other, or maybe it was just the prompt Puffy had picked, but whatever it was, it was *brilliant*.

"Pick a secret," the team captain had announced, setting up a timer on her phone, "it could be one that you've had for years, or one you just hid away this morning. Whatever it is, pick one and write from the perspective of that secret."

When he had first heard that prompt, he wanted to laugh. A persona poem from his biggest secret, as if his biggest secret wasn't the mere act of writing itself—it was meta, he'd give it that. It was meta and totally, hilariously painful, but Puffy's prompts always were; the team captain firmly believed in shoving her writers out of their comfort zone to access their true potential. Sure, sometimes it led to scrambled messes of words and jumbled thoughts, sometimes it was nothing more than venting on paper and misshapen images, but every now and then when Puffy nudged them *just right*, it made something beautiful. *Vulnerability*, she'd say, twirling a pen between her fingers as if it was a dagger and she the assassin, *is the best way to start a poem. Start genuine, and the rest will follow.*

'Start genuine', Tommy couldn't help but think that's what made this whole thing so hard sometimes, allowing a stranger to see the deepest parts of yourself, *your true self*, all through a few words on the page. Starting genuine meant doing away with the throw-away similes and figurative language that decorated his thoughts, meant cleaving away at all that excess to

find the core of what he was saying, who he was—‘start genuine’, and stand waiting as the entire world judged you.

And yes, it was all very terrifying, so much so that sometimes the thought of going to poetry practice or sending his teammates his newest draft ate away at his chest and clogged his breath, but there was still nothing like it. The adrenaline each time he finished his first draft, the feeling of elation bubbling under his skin and exploding with each hurried breath as he smeared ink all over his hands, his face, uncaring at the aftermath of his art because *this was creating*. This was everything spell-binding and impossible; it was late night spent marking up third drafts with red pens and a discarded Coke can by his side; it was mumbling lines of well-loved poems to yourself in the grocery store; it was sending your friend a cento that reminded you of them; it was acidic and savory and warmth and numbing and it was *magic*. His magic.

(And it was addictive, that was for sure. Lord only knows how many times Ranboo had to poke him to actually take notes during class instead of trying his hand at haikus in the margins of his paper)

*Start genuine, and the rest would follow.* It was easy to say that his biggest secret was that his family didn’t know he wrote: he could rant to Tubbo for hours about the simultaneous want to have Phil recognize his art but revulsion at the thought of the man reading his work, could draft sestina after sestina about poems tucked away once sunrise came, only to be loved at night. But was that really *it*? It felt too easy, too *safe*, and if there was one thing Tommy knew Puffy hated, it was easy poems.

*(Always go past the first read, Mr. Sam would say in AP Lang, dark eyes glittering as he highlighted a seemingly inconsequential line in an Allen Ginsberg poem, there’s always something beyond the easy answer, always something deeper. Look at the expected and find the unexpected.)*

Tommy’s fingers had wrapped tighter around his pen as he pondered in those first few minutes, teammates scrambling to link words around him. So what was his biggest secret? What lay just underneath the surface?

(Next to him, Puffy had briefly stopped her own spell-work to glance up at him, tilting her head as she watched indecision play upon his face. Her pen stilled, and she shot him a reassuring smile. He had tried his best to take it in stride; he tried to pretend he didn’t notice the worry pinching her features)

There was something deeper, beneath his dried mouth and the creature clawing at his throat—it lay patiently in his chest, sleepy and unassuming. It was waiting for him to just reach between the slits of his ribcage and pluck it out, waiting for him to nudge it awake. But what was it? What about himself did he not know?

*(Look at the expected.)*

What *did* he know about himself? Well, he was a rising senior in high school who liked writing and hated P.E., his favorite color was pink even if he told everyone it was red (because red was a manly color, that meant Danger and Strength and pink reminded him too

much of a certain older brother...), he hated pistachio ice cream, his name was Tommy Watson—

Well, that wasn't quite right. Technically his first name was 'Theseus'—he was named by his at-the-time seven year-old brother who had hyper fixated on Greek mythos, sue him—but it was unwieldy and embarrassing and no one had called him that since Techno's junior year and...

*(There's always something beyond the easy answer, always something deeper)*

And no one but his family and his school's front office knew his name wasn't Tommy, not even Tubbo. He had taken special care to erase all trace of legend and tragedy from himself, all the imprints his brothers had left behind, their fingerprints dusted away with each *Tommy K. Watson* scribbled down on homework assignments and permission slips. To everyone else, he was 'Tommy', the kid who hitched rides with almost-strangers and was always on the move, always finding new places to hide away, the kid with an ear-drum shattering laugh that got him more than a few stern talking-to's in school, who cursed just a little too much and apologized not enough. To everyone but him, he was just Tommy Watson. A salvaged name. A lie.

*(Find the unexpected)*

And with that he had begun to write.

"...the poet like an acrobat," something in him couldn't help but hum now, wry and lilting as he dashed his thoughts upon the page like a skull on stone, "*climbs on rime to a high wire of his own making*". He curled closer to his notebook, propping it up on his knees as he crossed out an entire stanza and started from scratch; there was an image stuck to him, that clung to the skin underneath his knuckles and drag itself across the jutting bone of his wrist—one of creaking front porches and the aftermath of shipwrecks, of strangers with aching familiar faces and an empty chair at the kitchen table. He let the images overtake him, and just like that, he was lost in a world of his own making.

"Stop! Fifteen minutes are up!" And just like that, it was already over.

"Wrap up whatever line you're at. We're going to share whatever is on our page, even if it's just a line." Puffy called out and something in the room burst, the chatter of Kinoko's returning to Tommy's ears as he breathes, elation falling from a simmer to a bubble and then finally to a rest as he placed his pen down. Across from him, Foolish is making a mad dash to finish whatever he's writing, and Ponk has pulled out his earbuds with a nervous laugh, staring at the words on his page as if they would leap and bite him. Even Dream, who always sat so still and unperturbed during practices, as if nothing could phase him, was anxiously playing with his mechanical pencil, unloading and re-loading the lead with the care one would treat a rifle.

Puffy gave a sharp grin, "alright, sharing time. Ponk, you're up!"

The man across from Tommy's face fell, and he nervously stood (Puffy's rule, if you were going to share, you would do it as if you were ready to perform then and there. Tommy

pretended he didn't notice the shake to his teammate's legs as Ponk swayed), gripping his notebook tighter. He glanced around the room, before huffing a sigh, seemingly resigned to the embarrassment of sharing a quick-write. An embarrassment they were all intimately familiar with.

"I, uh, didn't get that far but I think it's something? I'm not sure," the performer started, tugging on the wooden bead dangling from one of his box-braids, "yeah. Well, here I go." He cleared his throat, briefly allowing his eyes to flutter shut as he evened his stance, and the group leaned forward subconsciously, reeled into the little universe Ponk was beginning to create.

(And that was Tommy's favorite part of practice, the temporary universes his teammates would spool for them, with each fragmented quick-write and practiced classic)

"I am only afraid of my boyfriend when I sit in the passenger seat."

The words fall from his friend's mouth, and Tommy feels as though a window has shattered. There is the quiet hum of poets around him as they breathe in the line, and Tommy can't help but find a smile twitch on his lips at the abrupt entrance. "I am only afraid of my boyfriend when music is playing out the radio... I am only afraid when music is playing out the radio and I sit in the passenger seat. I am in the passenger seat and I am afraid of my boyfriend, only, I cannot reach the dial to turn off the radio. Steely Dan is playing and I cannot feel the tips of my fingers, I am afraid, and my boyfriend is sitting in the driver's seat."

Ponk inhaled sharply, as if he wanted to continue before determinedly pressing his lips shut and giving Puffy a pained nod. Snaps erupted from the small team, Puffy smiling at the poet, eyes dewey and thinly-veiled pride blossoming in the crows-feet near her eyes as she murmured a 'good job' while the other timidly began to sit down. Foolish eagerly chatters about the use of repetition as he gives Ponk constructive feedback, and Dream nods along, butting in to mention that the poem might work better if given form or a rhyme scheme.

"Oh, what about like, a mutated sestina?" Tommy interrupted, and all eyes turned to him. He fought off a blush at the sudden attention. "I think... I mean, you've obviously got a talent for repetition, and I think that a sestina could help emphasize the words you're focusing on. But you should, like, play with it. Make it your own."

Ponk tilted his head, before breaking into a grin. "I like that. A sestina..." He pondered it for a bit longer, humming quietly to himself as he glanced down at his page before perking up, his smile turned anxious, "oh! And, uh, one more secret I guess, though it doesn't have a poem." He took a deep breath, face twitching in worry before he spouted, "I use all pronouns. Just for future reference. Yeah. Nice, dope. Thanks."

The team blinked, stunned into silence until chaos erupted and Foolish clapped and Puffy is suddenly howled, "let's go LGBTs!" Ponk is laughing, hands covering her face in mild mortification as Dream has given her a claps her on the back, murmuring something that makes Ponk laugh even harder and Tommy feels a surge of affection overwhelm him. *Oh Christ*, the realization is not sudden, but it's no less disarming, *I love these fucking idiots*. He steadily ignores the cool fear that pricks at the waves of warmth beating against his ribcage, instead giving Ponk a toothy smile and a heartfelt congratulations.

“Alright! Next, Foolish!”

And so they continue, each poet reading the few stanzas they’d manage to pen down and the group responding with a mixture of praise and critique. Foolish admits that he didn’t know how to change a lightbulb (apparently he had been living in complete darkness for the past two months because of it, and spent almost a hundred dollars in candles), Puffy proudly announces that she has conditioned herself only to cry to Lorde songs, Dream quietly reads from his notebook, “only four people know where I live, this fact has a meaning,” before quickly sitting down and the secret remains a secret for another poem, and suddenly it’s Tommy’s turn to join the fray.

Tommy stood, shoulders hunched inward and eyes bouncing from poet to poet as he struggled to smooth his breathing, failing as his heart thundered. He cleared his throat, once, twice, before forcing out, “uh. Okay. I-I kinda wrote this really hurriedly the last minute so —“ the too-familiar *no disclaimers!* of his friends interrupts him, and he scrambled to collect his thoughts, offering a weak smile, “right. Okay. So. Here it goes.”

(There is a moment before you share a newborn poem in which you hesitate. It is here that the poet has the most power over themselves that they ever will have: they can decide now, in this small flutter of their lungs before they speak, if they will smother the newborn where it lays, kill it off before it even has a chance to open its eyes. It is here the poet becomes a necromancer, momentarily given sovereignty over life as they glance down at their infant universe, and decide whether or not they should let it burn out and collapse in upon itself, leaving a ghost in its place.)

Tommy looked down at the first line of his poem, and made a decision:

“I am a freshman in high school when I first kill Theseus.”

Across from him, Dream’s eyes gleamed.

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That practice they spent the rest of the night strategizing how to best maneuver their way through the slam. Which, in Tommy’s opinion, was much more stressful than sharing a poem he had whipped up in fifteen minutes. Just in order to participate they needed a minimum of seven poems; only one poem could be repeated in between the first two rounds (if they made it that far, that is), and this did not include the third round which was dedicated to what they called ‘shorty’ poems (performances of a classic and a response that were both under a minute with a thirty-second grace period, which made Tommy want to crawl underneath a table and cry. A one minute poem? *In what world—*). The most poems they could feasibly bring to the table would probably be eight max, meaning that a few folks would have both group poems and solos to juggle—Tommy couldn’t help the stuttering of his breath at that knowledge, that he might be responsible for more than just one performance, that he’d somehow need to find a way to mesh his writing with another’s...

*That’s fuckin’ terrifying.*

“Alright, while all this discussion is fine and dandy,” Puffy interrupted their mutterings, looking for all the world like a war general stood in the situation room, “the best way to go

about this is to collect what classics y'all are thinking of and see if there's overlap. Last practice I asked you to comprise a list of three classic poems and one shorty you liked from this year's anthology—it's game time. Spill."

Tommy pulled out his phone and scrolled through his notes app (ignoring the countless untitled notes that were the beginnings of long-abandoned pieces or reminders to text Ranboo for Spanish notes), biting his lip as he bounced his knee in anticipation. He wasn't nervous per se, in fact he was ecstatic to finally begin pinning down the set-list for the slam, but he was hoping that being so fresh on the scene, so new, wouldn't hinder his chances of claiming a classic for himself. Foolish had once mentioned offhandedly that past teams he'd been on (something called 'Las Nevadas' or other, apparently they might be making an appearance this year at SMP) had always allowed senior team members to pick classics first, leaving the crumbs to the newbies, and Tommy was terrified that he'd end up having to respond to an old Walt Whitman poem or something. *Not that there's anything wrong with Walt*, he chided himself as he clicked on the note file he was looking for, *I just have no good input for anything regarding "O Captain! My Captain!"*, and *I refuse to read that poem one more time*.

"I'll go first." Foolish lifted his hand to catch Puffy's attention, pulling out his trusty leather-bound notebook with an engraved shark on the front, courtesy of Ponk for his birthday, "For regular-length classics, I really liked "Small Craft Talk Warning" by Dean Young, and "Essay on Craft" by Ocean Vuong as well. My third was a bit different from those two: I chose "Song" by Adrienne Rich. For a shorty, I liked "Housekeeping" by Natasha Tretheway."

"Oh! I liked Ocean Vuong's! That was on my list," Ponk's hand shot up like she was a kindergartner again. In her excitement she wobbled a bit off balance, his singular arm causing him to lean a little too close to the left, but seemed undisturbed as her teammates shot forward as if to catch them, steadying themselves easily, "I'd be down to do a group piece!"

Puffy hummed, looking contemplative as she relaxed backwards now that potential-crisis was avoided (and Tommy was reminded with a snicker why they all called her Momma Puffy), flicking through the large binder that contained every poem in this year's anthology. "I liked Vuong's "Essay on Craft" too; we could hop on it as a group poem if you want? Unless you're feeling really strongly about doing it as a solo?"

"Not at all!" Foolish gave a toothy grin, one that reminded Tommy a bit too much of the sharp-mouthed marine animals he loved so much. "I'd like to try my hand at a group piece—it's been ages."

"Nice, so that's a start. Anyone else have overlap?" Puffy paused to look up at the group, nodding decidedly as the other members of the team shook their heads 'no'. "Great, okay. Me, Ponk and Foolish on Vuong's classic." Then, suddenly: "Tommy what poems were you thinking?"

He felt his chest tighten, but took it as a good sign that Puffy was asking for his input second instead of last. Sure, it didn't guarantee that he'd get the poems he'd want, but it was better than being forced to sit on the sidelines as he turned over the remaining pieces in the anthology. Next to him, Dream had perked up, eyeing the teen curiously as he pulled up the

list of poems he liked on his notes app (which, admittedly, was way more than five, but he had been able to boil it down to a handful he liked the most).

“Right, uh I was really into “Orchids Are Sprouting From the Floorboards” by Kaveh Akbar, because y’know, it’s Kaveh, but I also liked “[Sometimes I don’t know if I’m having a feeling]” by Matthew Siegel, and “Frame” by Franny Choi. For my shorty, I thought “Good Bones” by Maggie Smith was good, but I’m not really sure I feel comfortable...ah, I don’t think I’m meant for short form, if that’s okay?” Tommy was not known for sounding uncertain, was known to despise anything less than exuding picture-perfect confidence, but in this small group of artists cluttered around a singular table in the corner of Kinoko’s way past closing, he couldn’t help the self-doubt beginning to claw at his chest, sinking its reckless teeth into his lungs. He wheezed through the puncture wounds quietly as the other slam poets took this in, Ponk propping their chin in their palm as they appraised the young writer, Dream rolling their pen between their index and thumb.

Puffy nodded emphatically, trying for a smile that Tommy knew was supposed to be reassuring but felt a little too sweet. “Of course, Tommy, don’t feel pressured to sign onto anything you don’t feel comfortable with. This is about having fun, not winning” Dream scoffed playfully and Puffy’s left eye twitched, though her smile did not waver. “Even if a certain parkour nerd has a competitive streak.”

“Hey! I’m just saying that winning should be at least one of our goals!” His tone lacked the usual heat that accompanied a debate-ready Dream, and he leaned forward from where he was perched on the couch to make eye contact with Tommy. “Though a few of those poems were ones I had on my list. I had both the Siegel piece and Kaveh’s, but I’m leaning Siegel. Maybe, if you’re ‘comfortable’ or whatever, we could do a group piece? A duo?”

“Dream,” Puffy started, a warning lilt to her tone that had Tommy squaring his shoulders. The said twenty year-old ignored her, instead boring his hazel eyes into Tommy’s, the sea crashing against withering moss on river-rock. He recognized it for what it was: even if an olive branch was being extended, there was still the hint of taunting to the way it shivered in the unpredictable wind between them—it was a challenge. Dream was trying to get a read on Tommy, trying to ‘figure him out’ as Puffy had said just a few weeks ago; even if the other member accepted him onto the team with open arms, Dream still wanted him to prove his worth.

*(Only four people know where I live, the man’s words had wormed their way back to his ear, and Tommy understood then what he had really meant, I am not a man who trusts easy, and I guard what’s mine closely. If you want to know me, you’re going to have to force your way in.)*

Tommy tried to ignore the goose-bumps beginning to rise on his skin.

“A duo?”

“Yeah, just me and you. I thinking of a really cool concept piece that could work perfectly for that poem, and I think our voices could mesh really well for it. Of course, if you want to just stick to solos that’s fine, but I’m thinking this piece could push us over the edge. I haven’t seen someone do a group piece with this Siegel poem, and definitely not the response I’m

thinking up.” He leaned back, ankle leant casually upon his knee as if discussing the weather. Tommy anxiously gripped his phone in his hands, willing himself to stop squirming. *Jesus fuck why is this dude intimidating.*

“Dream.” Puffy had placed down her binder, hands on her hips. She cocked her head, eyes narrowed in frustration. “This isn’t some experiment, or high-risk parkour tournament. This is art, *Tommy’s art*, and you shouldn’t pressure him to do something he doesn’t want to—“

“I’m in.” Tommy blurted, causing Puffy to blink in shock (whether it be at Tommy taking the bait or just for interrupting her, he didn’t know) and the others to shuffle anxiously. Across from him, Dream’s river-rock remained unflinching as Tommy’s ocean churned. “I think that’d be...I’m in. I think I’d like to try.”

Dream’s returning smirk was almost enough to make Tommy immediately regret his decision. Almost.

(Mr. Sam always said he had a stubborn streak, one that made teaching him hard but disliking him even harder. *You don’t know when to give up, which admittedly can be a bad thing when you refuse help, but it also means you are one hell of a student.* And it was true, he had spent enough detentions in freshman year cooped up with his math teacher purely for the fact that he refused the woman’s help on assignments and turned his nose up at remedial classes, but even the old bat had to admit that when he was determined to get a question right, he’d *get it right*, no matter how many tries it took. If anything was to be questioned about Tommy, it would not be his dedication)

(And no, that stubbornness was all *him*, no hand-me downs from older siblings or inherited from his father’s bloodline—it was all Tommy Watson, no one else.)

“Okay,” Puffy tried her best to quell the hesitance in her voice, but everyone could hear it by the way her words quivered as if she was moments from cussing a certain-someone out, “that makes another group piece by Tommy and Dream. I think that means the rest can be solos. Anyone down to claim a shorty from the jump?”

Ponk’s hand rose again and the room erupted in chatter as the group negotiated poems to fill their set, but Tommy had already begun tuning the noise out. He was still staring at Dream, watching as the older’s relaxed posture shifted minutely, his palm resting upon his thigh as he drummed his fingers; he wasn’t anxious, that much was obvious, but the energy he had been keeping pent up was beginning to burst, as if he had been hiding his cards until the final hour. As if this was all merely a game of cat and mouse, and Tommy knew exactly who was meant to be prey this round.

Dream’s gaze snapped to Tommy’s and his fingers stilled. The oxygen of the room constricted, a new, shard-sharp universe beginning to bloom in the separated atoms around them. The man tilted his head and Tommy mirrored the action, blue eyes flickering, and Dream’s glinted in kind—the unsettling of an ocean before a monsoon met by the rustle of spring leaves before they turned color, the clashing of elements never meant to touch yet perfectly imperfectly balanced. The two stared at each other, both aware that in whatever game they were deciding to play, there would be either two victors or none at all; this poem was a group effort, and while it may be a trial orchestrated by the elder to test the will of the



younger, there would either be success or failure. The latter was unacceptable, this Tommy knew.

*“A high wire of his own making...”* Even if this wire was bound snap one day, leaving him helpless in midair, he would still tip-toe upon it as if this was what he was made for. Because it *was*. Dream may be doubtful of his abilities as a poet, but writing was what he was built to do—his brain was a thing of metaphors and sparking cables, of acid-washed images and similes and disorganized line breaks and all the things that made poetry a thing to be loved.

If his teammate wanted to pose a challenge, he’d have no qualms about rising to the occasion; if his teammate wanted a game of cat and mouse, he’d give him one of dog eat dog.

Because sure, they might be at each other’s throats, but a wolf could recognize one of its kind, and regardless of how the other snarled and howled and snapped, they were still pack animals at heart. They still would be drawn to each other’s moonlit company, two creatures of the same breed, just as eager as the other to demonstrate the claws and fangs they’d be willing to give this for pack, this team, how much they’d be willing to tear. Just as eager to establish their dominance.

And Tommy refused to be the runt any longer.

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So now he was here, phone in hand as he grimly stared down at the reminder blaring on his screen in blocked text. *THURS. OPEN MIC*—they had decided to do a test-run of their group poem at an open mic Karl was hosting in Kinoko’s a little get together for all the poets in the area to try their new material in a judgement free place. Unfortunately for Karl, he hadn’t realized that many poets used it as a way to scope out the other competitors as the slam loomed closer and closer. While there wouldn’t be many poets from their hometown competing (at least, not many that Puffy could put a name or a face too), it was still an opportunity for the team to see how their poems matched up to those they were likely to face off against. Sure, they were running the risk of being plagiarized by another team, but Dream had been steadfast in his belief that his and Tommy’s poem would be safe from any potential poaching.

“Besides,” the man had said, voice lighter and more jovial now that him and Tommy had spent hours cooped up together, melding their words into one, “even if they wanted to steal our idea, no one could do it like we could. We’ve got something they don’t: chemistry.”

*(More like you’re a lunatic and I’m the idiot who decided to work with you,* Tommy had wanted to say, but he felt warmth bubble in his chest regardless. For all the overwhelming cockiness and intimidation tactics this dude used, he sure was good company and they worked surprisingly well together)

But now Tommy had a dilemma. While he was excited (and perhaps a bit terrified) at the prospect of reading aloud his poem with Dream for the first time in front of a live audience, he now had to find a way to get to the coffee shop by 9pm. While usually he took the bus or hitched a ride with a friend, there was no way that Phil would let the teen run out of the house unaccompanied so late at night. The man might care very little about what Tommy got up to

and was more lenient than any parent should be, but he wasn't absolutely oblivious to the comings and goings of his house, especially now that Techno and Wilbur were here.

Which was great and all, but Tommy missed the freedom that had come with his father being somewhat negligent of his younger son's activities and whereabouts.

*Look on the bright side*, he could almost hear Tubbo's annoyingly optimistic voice chime in his head, and he rolled his eyes on impulse, *at least you're getting homemade dinners each night now! That's gotta be something!*

Right. Silver linings and all that. Thanks Tubbo.

And so here he was, standing outside of a wooden bedroom door with his knuckle poised to knock, but arms unable to move. Part of him wanted to turn on his heel and go the other way, say 'screw it!' to this open-mic and text Dream that he'd unfortunately be unable to attend, but he knew that he had to at least try. Dream had extended an olive branch, and even if a serpent was twisted around its spine, he would still grab it with both hands.

At first he hadn't known who to ask: Phil would definitely be suspicious of where he was going at 9pm and would want to follow, and he was currently in a spat with Wilbur from last night's dinner, but the premise of carpooling with Techno was one that made his stomach turn over in anxiety. Of all his family members, Techno was the one he understood the least—despite naming him, the pink-haired twin had interacted very little with Tommy when they were growing up. He was always off on trips to fencing tournaments across the state and country, always minimizing the time spent at home with every night at the public library—Techno was an unknown, an enigma he was unable to puzzle into clarity.

And yet, the idea of dragging Wilbur to a slam was just as horrifying. His brother of slammed doors and shouting matches; his brother of gentle hands calloused from metal strings and wind-chime laughter. The brother that had practically raised him, filling in the roles Technoblade and Phil left behind with each improvised lullaby and microwaved dinner—Tommy didn't know how to speak to this Will, how to interact now that they had both grown up away from each other. But Wilbur still felt too close, too familiar and unfamiliar all at once.

Two brothers, one brand new and the other one twisted into something else. Both strangers; both complete opposites of each other.

(Sometimes he would look at his brothers and wonder, how can two people born of the same cloth be so different? But he understood that while they may have been sheared from the same fabric, it was the stitching that truly made them distinct. Wilbur was a tapestry, embroidered upon and dotted with thread until the textures sewed meadows and gardens upon his soul's face. And where Wilbur was all pretty stitching and handled with care, Techno was patterned, was repeating seams that created rivulets until it was the sea's yawning mouth, deep and suffocating.)

*Pick your poison*, he wanted to sing, dry and bitter, *if there is no lesser of two evils, then what venom will you choose to be your downfall?*

He flexed his hand, knuckles aching impatiently as they waited for him to make contact with the wooden door in front of him. Tommy loosed a frustrated sign through his nose, sure that if anyone looked they'd find steam pouring from his ears.

*FIND A RIDE!*

Why couldn't Kinoko's just be down the street? Couldn't Karl consider relocating? He was sure the real estate here was booming enough to prompt a move. And why did Phil have to be so stringent on curfews? It's not like Tommy had ever gotten kidnapped before whenever he took the bus—

*Whatever! Just...do it. It's for the sake of art! Yeah, pretend that it's for the glory of performance poetry!* He snorted. Yeah, sure, he'd go with that. He was doing this for the integrity of the artistic world, allowing his two estranged brothers to poke around his business for the first time in eight years. *Totally* worth it.

With a lurch his fist pounded on the door, an awkward *knock-knock* echoing in the empty hall as he waited for his brother to open his bedroom door. For a brief moment there was silence on the other side of the wood, no indication that anyone had heard him, and Tommy almost sagged with relief. Great, now he could go tell Dream that he had tried to book a ride but unfortunately he couldn't make it. *Ah, sorry man, I tried really hard, I promise, I just couldn't find anyone willing—*

The door jerked open and Tommy froze, hand still lingering in the air from where he had just knocked, eyes wide as the glow of red LED lights fell into the hallway, casting shadows upon the floor, pinned under his feet.

"Tommy? What do you want?" Wilbur asked, and Tommy swore he could feel the effects of poison creeping down his throat. It was coating his tongue in saliva, in slick venom, thick and unrelenting as he stared up at his older brother. "Dude, it's like 11pm, what could you possibly need right now?"

The cutting edge of his brother's words had Tommy reeling backwards before his limbs relaxed with practiced ease. He shot his brother a bashful smile, as if he wasn't currently on the precipice of cursing every god that every dared to exist and bring his pathetic form into this universe.

"Hey Big Man, nice to see you! I, uh, wanted to ask a favor..."

Hypocritically, he prayed to those very same gods that he was just being melodramatic, that this wasn't a catastrophe waiting to happen. He prayed he was lucky enough to escape this week unscathed.

Wilbur rose an eyebrow and Tommy gulped, already feeling the heat of anxiety creep up his neck and flush his cheeks.

He had a feeling that Lady Luck was out of the office this week.

## Chapter End Notes

Ponk my beloved. Also, I promise next chapter is less slam logistics oriented and more ~emotions~ with somebody's POV that isn't our boy Tommy's, but this chapter is very much doing the heavy lifting in terms of setting up the slam bless her heart. Hope y'all enjoyed tho!

I also might have made spotify playlists when I should've been packing for college for some of the characters if anyone wants to check em out! U can find em at this link (that should hopefully work): <https://open.spotify.com/user/bdgtykwz9jpc18tt6bp6lpw91?si=931854edf42f4a8d> . Some of em hint at the future events of the fic sooooo ;)

As always, take care, and drop reccs in the comments!

# **“I gave/shape to my fears and made excuses. I varied my/velocities, watched myself sleep.”**

## Chapter Notes

Title from ““Birds Hover over the Trampled Field” by Richard Silken, recommended by one of the lovely people reading this fic!!! (Not sure if you want me to shout you out in front of everyone haha, but you know who you are and thank you very much for the recc!)

Thank you to all who have read, liked, kudo-ed and commented so far! There's 6k+ of yall here which is \*nervous laughter\* much more than I would have thought, so thank you very very much! Hope you are all staying safe!

okay y'all,,,,,these next two chapters were written over a period of 10 hours, in which I obsessively listened to one spotify playlist and typed over two drafts of two different 6k word chapters so please, be gentle with any errors. I am sure there are many.

TWs: mentioned drinking, smoking/vaping, jokes about car-crashes, arguing, light-hearted threats, mentions of bombs/explosives (as metaphor) and I think that's it! Let me know if I missed any!

Wilbur wasn't sure why he had said yes.

Alright, well, that wasn't exactly the truth; he wasn't sure why he had thought it was a *good idea* to say yes. When Tommy had knocked on his door, blundering through a half-arsed plea to hitch a ride to Kinoko's at 9pm on a Thursday night, Wilbur's immediate impulse was to curtly say 'no' and close the door on his little brother's face. Sure, it would've been a bit bitchy, but Wilbur still hadn't gotten over his jet-lag from the flight over and it was 7am his time (but it was pitch black outside, and Wilbur's internal clock had no idea what to do with that), and he was still on edge from last night's dinner-fiasco.

Subconsciously, Wilbur knew that his reaction to Tommy's avoidant nature was irrational, and he knew that it was probably a confluence of multiple stressors such as the fact he had forgotten to pack his toiletries and needed to scour for a toothbrush and acceptable shampoo (Techno's would not *cut* it), but he still couldn't help the hurt that had begun to simmer at the thought that Tommy didn't want to talk to him. Once upon a time, Tommy would have given anything to ramble about his latest interest to his older brother, to occupy the teen's time with stories of his escapades half-baked with fibs—this New Tommy was the complete opposite. New Tommy was quiet, secretive, and so *angry*; it had unsettled both Wilbur and Techno how the youngest's fury was no longer something explosive, now it was burrowed underneath measured glares and words that were pinpricks of poison, the tip of something much sharper and so much more venomous. Techno had admitted that it made him 'nervous', which is to

say that his twin was *terrified* by the seventeen year old—he compared the anger to thunderclouds, to something heavy with rain and lightning, just waiting to strike. *He's the calm before the storm now*, Techno had said, *a wind waiting to change. A tempest, if you will.*

*You are so fucking pretentious. And dramatic*, Wilbur had snarked back, but still he felt dread pool in his stomach, *God, English majors—he's just a teenager, Tech. It'll be fine.* Yet, even as he said it, he knew the words were nothing more than hollow attempts at reassurance. That palpable anger that lined Tommy's movements, quick as a flash and more bite than bark...

Wilbur thought it was a time bomb.

(And wasn't that even more terrifying? His brother was still an explosive, just not one of firework-bright colors and hissing pops, not something harmless until you got too close—he was something of smoke, of gunpowder, of echoes and foundation-less buildings with blown-out windows. He was a thing of destruction. *And he was just like Wilbur—*)

Nope. That train of thought would not be leaving the station; there would be no self-deprecation today! (God, his therapist would be proud)

Regardless of detonators or rain clouds, the two twins had come to an unspoken agreement: they needed to figure out what the boy was hiding. Whatever he was being so secretive about, whatever kept him locked in his room, muttering to himself late into the night, it had to do with the reason he was treating his family like broken glass. He was always dancing around them, avoiding the casual touches Wilbur offered his way, dodging Techno's stilted attempts at affection with every hurried exit out of the living room or kitchen. Wilbur didn't have to pretend it didn't hurt, because it did; it was a needle weaseled in-between the slots of his ribcage; it was someone ripping his diaphragm out from under his lungs; it was painful and it *hurt*.

(And he knew Techno felt the same, even if his brother remained ever-stoic and stubborn, refusing to share more than a hesitant glance with his twin and shrug in feigned indifference. He knew it from the way the Grad student would lean haltingly towards the blonde as if to reach out, as if to swallow him in a hug and never let go. Techno never was good at this whole affection thing—he always loved too little or too much. Him and Wilbur were the same in that way)

And so, when Tommy had approached him in faded pjs that had once been Techno's robotics shirt and Wilbur's flannel bottoms, asking for Wilbur to drive him at 9pm to that cutesy coffee shop without explaining why...well, Wilbur had already known what he was going to say. It was easy to fall into this act of big brother he had been perfecting for so long, to ruffle Tommy's hair and tease and say, *of course, anything for you Toms*, without hesitating. Because he had spent eight years being Tommy's sole confidant, and even if it had been eight years since that might've been true, he still knew his role perfectly.

Now, grip tight on the steering wheel of his father's old SUV with an almost-stranger in the passenger seat, Wilbur was struck with the realization that this bomb may explode in his face and he'd be absolutely helpless in avoiding the fall out. But it'd be fine! Yeah! Sure Tommy was an enigma, and sure, Wilbur was already on pins and needles about trying to bond with a

little brother he hadn't seen in seven years or so, but at the end of the day he was just another moody teen! What *real* harm could he do?

(*A lot, actually*, he winced. Wilbur knew better than anyone that a moody teen was just seconds away from total annihilation at any given time, *a lot of fucking damage. Holy shit, we're not getting out this car alive*)

Okay, so maybe this was a terrible idea. He gripped the steering wheel tighter, knuckles turning bone-yellow white.

"Uhhhh, you alright there big man?"

Tommy's voice snapped him out of his mini-break down, and Wilbur forced himself to shoot his younger brother a reassuring smile—from the way Tommy winced, scooting closer to the car door as if ready to make a run for it, it was less reassuring and more maniacal. Wilbur cleared his throat, flexing his fingers on the leather wheel, "I'm fine! I'm good just, y'know, getting used to the old thing. Haven't driven this car in years, you know, last time I did I was sixteen and crashed into a tree! Haha!"

Silence.

Tommy stared at him, face slack as he clearly tried to find an acceptable response to the equivalent of word-vomit that roughly translated to 'hey I'm a horrible driver who regularly gets into car accidents, hope this goes well!'. Wilbur cringed. *If there's a God out there*, he silently pleaded to the cotton ceiling of their old Ford, *please just strike me dead*.

Wilbur squeezed his eyes shut, forehead against the wheel. He knew his face was burning red in agonizing embarrassment. "Please just put the address in the phone."

"Right, on it."

The two sat quietly as Tommy fiddled with the GPS, hooking his phone to the AUX chord (which was rigged up with about four different adapters just to get the old thing to do any of the basic modern functions that everyone sans Phil was reliant on. *Christ, this car has to be just as old as Dad, and Lord only knew how old that relic was*), and Wilbur slowly eased himself back into the art of driving in SoCal after dark. Back in London, he had used public transit more than he drove, and the city was delightfully free of freeways. Now, he would be toe-to-toe with his old enemy: the I-5.

"Ready?" He asked, and next to him Tommy loosed a sigh, hand inching for the safety-handle at the roof of the car, tugging anxiously at his seat belt. The teen gave a battle-weary nod. Wilbur sighed, "okay, let's rock-n-roll."

Wilbur stepped on the gas and the car lurched into action.

They almost got into an accident pulling out the driveway. That was the first close call.

Near-crashes and freeway shenanigans aside, the drive to Kinoko's was deceptively pleasant. Tommy was a pretty good passenger, courteously keeping an eye out for cars switching lanes

and reminding Wilbur when an turn or exit was up ahead (which was much more helpful than Wilbur would ever admit, because *fuck* driving on the 5 was a nightmare), and he played some pretty descent music, too. While Wilbur didn't know what a majority of teens were listening to nowadays, he had an inkling that Tommy's music taste was a bit...*above average*, if he was being gracious. Amongst the countless Brockhampton and The Weeknd tracks were specks of gold—Lianne La Havas, Vulfpeck, Jack Stauber, and...was that *Chance the Rapper*?—and Wilbur found himself enjoying the eclectic rhythms his brother queued as they cruised down the highway, road lights blurring the inky sky.

It was nice, casual; he hadn't felt this in a while, the easy companionship that came with brothers, hadn't sat in a car listening to music with Tommy since...

(The last time he had felt this comfortable, this warm, with his little brother was a sleepy car-ride with Autoheart ringing in his ears, his head upon windowpane and eyes closed shut. But still, he could *feel* his brother next to him, the tug of the white earphone chord as the car jolted, as Tommy shifted in his seat and leaned closer to Wilbur to give the wire more slack. At the time, it had felt like a reassurance, a promise, that everything would end up alright; it had felt like they were going to be *okay* again. And he had fallen asleep, blissful and full of hope, a twitching smile on his lips)

Well, it had been a long time coming. At least this time he was fully awake.

"Turn here, we're about...two-ish minutes away."

"Alright, cool." Wilbur hummed, flicking on his turn-signal. There was the sharp *ding* of a notification popping up on Tommy's phone, and the boy groaned, reaching to answer it. Wilbur's eyes shifted briefly from the road to see his brother frowning, chewing his lip in thought as he hurriedly typed a reply. "That the mystery friend you're meeting? Your drug dealer? Your secret girlfriend?" He smiled when the kid barked out a laugh

"Pfft, yeah right. Nah, it's just," Tommy broke off sharply, as if catching whatever was about to fly off his tongue with the thin edge of his teeth. Wilbur narrowed his eyes, but said nothing as the boy considered his next words, "just a friend. He's just getting all pissy at me because *apparently* he wanted me there fifteen minutes early. Fuckin' dickhead, man."

Wilbur let out a strangled laugh, trying to brush away the tension that rose alongside his suspicion. He hoped that whoever his brother was meeting wasn't bad news—if this Mystery Man was a drug dealer, Dad would never let Wilbur live this down. Still, more alarming was the fact that Tommy (his old partner in crime, his little brother who always wanted to show Wilbur his newest bit of mischief) was refusing to tell Wilbur *anything*.

"Well, you can tell him we're pulling in the parking lot now." He huffed, sliding into a parking spot. Before he had even gotten to turn off the engine and pull out his key, Tommy was unbuckling his seat-belt, excitedly forcing open the door and hopping out the car, eyes pinned on his phone as he texted rapidly with the Mystery Man on the other side of the screen. Wilbur cringed at the loud *slam* of the car door, and quietly slid out of the drivers seat, feet hitting the tarmac.



At the sound of Wilbur's door huffing closed, Tommy spun abruptly upon his heel, blue eyes wide. Wilbur rose a single eyebrow, baffled as his brother began to anxiously look around, a bashful hand coming up to scratch at the back of his neck. "What are you so nervous about?"

"Oh, uh, nothing just..." Tommy's eyes darted down to his phone and back up to Wilbur, his features twisting into a grimace. There was a breath, in which Wilbur could practically hear the gears in the teen's head clunking softly, in which Tommy looked like a man about to slaughter a puppy, before the teen steeled himself and set his lips into a determined frown. "Will, could you stay in the car?"

Wilbur blinked. *What?*

"What?"

"I—look, it's not personal, I just want to kinda hang out with my friend alone so..."

"No, nuh-uh, no way. I did not drive you out here at nine at fucking night just so you can tell me 'wait in the car'." Wilbur shook his head adamantly, arms crossed in front of his chest. In front of him, Tommy at least had the decency to look a bit guilty. A sneer began to make its way across the elder's face. "Do you think I'm an idiot? I know the shit teens get up to—I'm not gonna be responsible for letting my little brother get kidnapped at a fucking coffee shop by a random-ass man! Phil would *kill* me!"

"C'mon Will, please," Tommy groaned, and all of a sudden he was reminded of afternoons spent trying to ignore a seven year-old Tommy as he pestered his older brother to take him out to a rated-R movie, "I promise it's nothin' bad or-or *nefarious*! It's just a little get together of a few friends and—"

"Oh! So there's more than just one person you're meeting now? Tommy, man, you can't," Wilbur huffed a frustrated sigh, hands twitching as he fought the urge to tug at his earlobes, an anxious habit he'd developed as a child he was always unable to break, "you can't just hang out with some people none of us know in the middle of the night. It's not safe. So I'm going to go in there with you, and meet these 'friends' of yours."

"Dude, I promise it's safe. I promise. It's just Kinoko's—the people who go here couldn't even hurt a fly, you know that!" Tommy argued, fists clenched at his sides, and Wilbur could see the brewing of that stormy, explosive anger that he and Techno had been oh so afraid of. The teen in front of him pulled his lips back into a snarl.

*Mayday!* A small, dry voice in him crowed, sticky with the mischief of a child, *mayday!* *Maybe this is a good time to backpedal.*

Wilbur glanced back at the coffee shop; the windows had their blinds drawn, but even through the plastic-white slits he could see the soft pulse of ambient lighting, greens and blues and everything that whispered *safe*. Faintly, there was the putter of caffe-house jazz lilting out its open door, welcoming and benign. It was true, Kinoko's was probably the least threatening place on Earth, but it wasn't the actual building Wilbur was nervous about, it was whoever lay inside.

(Whoever Tommy wanted to *hide* from them)

Wilbur screwed up his face; he hated having to be the buzzkill.

“Look,” he finally offered, giving Tommy an apologetic smile, though it did little to tame the growing look of fury upon his brother’s face, “I still can’t let you go in by yourself, but how about this: we *both* go in, I stay for a few minutes, scope out the vibe, and then *if* I feel comfortable with you being there, I’ll go hang out in the parking lot until you’re done, okay? That sound good?”

Tommy pursed his lips, glancing back at the entrance of the docile little cafe, eyes softening as the winking fairy-lights shimmered in the reflection of his blue irises, looking as though a dew-drop small star had settled upon his pupils. Wilbur’s fingers twitched, and in the hollows of his inner ear he could hear a chorus begin to rise, lyrics unfolding unbeknownst to anyone but him, a new symphony in the quiet hum of cars and jazz and nighttime fading into almost nothing.

“Fine.” Tommy hissed, and Wilbur was snapped out of his reverie by the sheer relief of placating his temperamental younger brother. *Thank fuck, I do not have the energy to deal with a tantrum right now.* He tried to shoot a friendly grin Tommy’s way, but the boy had already turned on his heel and began stalking towards Kinoko’s front porch, hands shoved in his sweatshirt pocket and hood up.

Wilbur’s lips twitched downwards.

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Truthfully, Tommy was fucked. That in itself wasn’t unusual, his luck was pretty shit on a good day, but really, today was going *horrible*. It had started with him waking up at noon to a barrage of texts from Ranboo about an AP Calc summer assignment neither of them had known about, and it looked like it was about to end with him embarrassing himself on stage in front of not only a group of poets that he *very* much respected and craved validation from, but his older goddamn brother. Great. He’d like to see how Tubbo would find the silver lining in this one.

(*At least you can get some good tea!* his little Jiminy Cricket of a friend hummed to no one but him, and Tommy once again cursed his over-active imagination for making his consciousness echo the voice of his lovably-annoying best friend)

Despite the utterly terrible vibes his day was giving off, he still felt the characteristic buzz of excitement that came with every sharp chime of Kinoko’s door opening as he stepped into his safe space, the bubbling euphoria at being in a space meant for *creating*, even if it was a bit dim and blurry with nerves. Glancing around, he noted that Karl had completely decked the place out for today’s open mic: ambient lighting was scattered across the room in the form of paper lanterns hung from the ceilings, casting green and blue shadows upon the wooden floor, and the beams supporting the ceiling dotted with glow-in-the-dark stars had been decorated with streamers, the thin scraps of paper zig-zagging across the cozy shop until it felt as though a star-embroidered cocoon was spun. As easy music twisted around the room, unimposing and lackadaisical, Tommy finally felt the trickling of eager nervousness that had been simmering underneath his skin for so long—he felt *ready*.

And there, sitting in a semi-circle around an unassuming mic and music stand, were the *poets*. Even as they casually lounged in plastic chairs, chatting about movie theaters or baseball or summer flowers or whatever it is poets pretend isn't another synonym for a poem, Tommy could feel the universes they were on the brink of spinning, sparking warmth like a lightbulb, bright and dazing.

And just like that he felt completely and helplessly unprepared.

Because he wanted it, he wanted it *all*. He wanted the way a woman with gauges was explaining to her bewildered friend the newest Star Wars spin-off; wanted the way quiet kid in the corner scribbled something feverishly on a napkin; wanted the man in a forest-green flannel was chatting up Karl and how the barista just handed him his coffee with an anxious giggle, flustered and trying to be polite; wanted the couple murmuring to each other about unread books and last-minute geniuses; wanted the poems and the music in the air and killed darlings and wanted the universes just waiting to burst into existence. He wanted to be a *Poet*.

"Finally! Big Man Tommy! I was wondering when you'd show up!" A holler drew him away from his pondering, and he found himself squished into the side of no other than Dream. The man was practically vibrating in place as he grinned at Tommy, hands flapping around wilding as he launched into a playful rant about Tommy being a 'bad teammate' who 'didn't think of how his tardiness would impact the morale of the team, really, how rude of him'—safe to say, the nerves were getting to the older blonde too. A laugh exploded out of Tommy, and he opened his mouth to retort something equally as witty and obnoxious as his teammate, before someone coughed pointedly behind him.

*Oh, great...*

"Well, if it isn't the good old Speedster," Wilbur jeered, arms splayed wide as he sauntered closer to the two. Tommy could feel Dream's arm stiffen from where it was wrapped around his shoulder, and the man's green eyes narrowed as Wilbur neared, "never thought I'd see your ugly mug again."

Tommy blinked. *Wait, these fuckers know each other?*

"The plan was I'd never have to see yours either." Dream snarked and tightened his grip around Tommy, tilting his head. "Last I heard, you ran away to England and started a little band. How's that going for you?"

And apparently they had a grudge. Great. Universe vs. Tommy Watson, one to zero!

Wilbur scowled. "While this doesn't look like a crack-den, still not impressed by the company you keep Tommy. Definitely not leaving you now, not with this bastard."

Tommy's head snapped over to glare at Wilbur, and his mouth fell slack in shock. "Oy! You fucker you can't just—"

"Is this guy bothering you, Tommy?" Dream grit out, and Tommy gawked. What was with these two?

“What? No—!”

“I should be asking *you* that, asshole.” Wilbur’s snarl was bordering on feral, and his eyes looked like they could cut glass. “Since you are, you know, holding onto my *little brother*.”

Tommy stopped breathing, and it was as if the room had fallen away. Distantly, he could hear the music wind down as the MC for the night approached the mic. Dream’s grip on his shoulders slackened, and the man’s eyes flashed in recognition before cool realization settled in the green irises, sending a shiver up Tommy’s spine. He didn’t like that look, that was Dream’s I’m-Going-To-Tempt-The-Universe-And-You’ll-All-Regret-It Look. Tommy felt his heart sputter, an uncontrollable terror gripping the racing muscle until he thought it’d be squeezed to death. *Oh God, what if he hates me? Why would he hate me? I didn’t do anything, did I? Oh my God. What if Wilbur hates me—*

“I see.” Was all the man said, and Tommy felt his heart drop to the floor. He was expecting fury, acid and razor-sharp words, not...whatever that was. Dream didn’t do vague, everything was purposeful and well thought out, and his sentences were never halting. They were sprawling, words like staircases leading to some grandiose point. As he got to know the man, he realized Dream didn’t do nice, he didn’t do non-confrontational. He was *Dream*, and Dream knew he *owned* language.

Alright, so Tommy was royally, irreversibly, fucked. This day couldn’t be worse.

“Great!” Wilbur said, seemingly undeterred by the strange behavior of the other man, “now kindly fuck off!” Tommy ignored his older brother, turning to Dream, eyes blown wide in confusion and apprehension. The man had physically distanced himself from the teen, arms hung limp at his sides as his eyes bore holes into Wilbur’s, as if he didn’t want to get near Tommy now that he knew of the two brother’s relation; it hurt more than Tommy was willing to admit.

“Dream, wait, I—“

“It’s fine.” He said, and they both knew that it wasn’t, really. “Listen, meet me outside during the break so we can run it one last time. Alone.”

“Yeah, yeah sure, but—“

“Tommy. Really, it’s fine.” And that was a dismissal, one that sent Tommy’s stomach into flips and had the creature in his throat chasing after its own tail, whimpering. This was wrong; it wasn’t meant to go this way, they were supposed to debut their poem to the eager ears of the audience and allow their words to flourish. *Tommy* was supposed to flourish, he was supposed to prove once and for all to Dream that he was a member of this team, just as important as Ponk or Foolish—*he was supposed to be a Poet tonight*.

Of course Wilbur had to ruin it. Of course, of course—what else should he have expected from his moody brother? His moody, absent older brother who was reckless with other’s feelings, who had spent his adolescence yelling at their father and sending Tommy cowering to his room. Of course! Tommy had been naive to think that eight years would change anything.

The anger was not quick. It was not blinding or cutting or stopped his heart—the thing in his throat growled forebodingly. This anger was a candle finally chewing away at the last bones of its wick; this anger was tea gone cold; this was the batteries of an old gameboy bleeding into nothing, was its cracked screen finally turning black and dead.

This anger was a poem. And he was going to perform the hell out of it on stage.

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Wilbur hadn't known what to expect, but an open mic was definitely not it. Where Wilbur was imagining some late night vaping circle born out of teenage rebellion, Tommy had apparently made himself at home in the middle of a poetry reading. There was no alcohol, no loud music, none of the fixtures of a high-schooler's summer that Wilbur had been more than acquainted with—this was more than tame, it was outright *boring*.

Person after person got up and read their work, and while some of it was quite nice and Wilbur appreciated the artwork (how could he not? He was a musician, a lyricist; he knew more about poetry than probably the kid who dragged him to this thing did), Wilbur was unable to concentrate on the flowery language, still stewing in the unadulterated rage of chancing upon Dream. No, not chancing: the slimy asshole apparently knew his little brother, was friends with him, and was the Mystery Man his brother had been texting the entire night. *I'll rip that ass that limb from limb, I'll make him regret the day he was ever born. Fuck him and his little parkour skills and his stupid face.* And he didn't really know what he was swearing, not really, but he knew it was malicious and violent. Because of all the dickheads his little brother could have befriended, of course it had to be *Dream*.

(Niki would be laughing her ass off right now, Eret too. Admittedly, his grudge against Dream was one of petty college drama and all that came with young adulthood, but it was still a valid grudge nonetheless. Hell, he'd broken Fundy's heart, basically his second little brother, and that in itself was unforgivable)

But he was going to show face and tough it out—there was no way that idiot with his stupid lime-colored hoodie would scare him away from his little brother and this stupid poetry reading. So he sat in a plastic foldable chair next to Tommy and watched act after act, scowl cemented on his features and eyes gleaming with what he sure was unbridled hatred. Every now and then, his eyes would flicker over to his brother, hoping to see some of the teen's thoughts splayed upon his face (because his brother had always been so expressive, so easy to read, and now it was as if he was a stone wall), but Tommy's gaze was determinedly pinned on the spotlighted microphone, unflinching. Whatever he had done with Wilbur outside in those few minutes during intermission, he had returned with a glint in his eye and a hard set to his mouth, looking for all the world like a man who'd seen war.

(It had been jarring, that was for sure, but slowly he was getting used to seeing a frown on his brother's sunny face more than a smile. His stomach turned at the realization)

And so the open mic continued, the MCs for the night (the bespectacled barista and a man with a white hand band that took every opportunity to flirt with his co-host) introducing each new poet to the booming applause of the audience, each poem heavy with metaphors and the responding snaps as the poets hummed and wowed at the piece. Wilbur didn't exactly understand what was going on (because fuck, when did they know to snap? Was there a code

or something? A signal? And why did they keep yelling ‘don’t be nice!’? Did they want them to be mean to each other?), but he found himself easing into the atmosphere, humming along with the audience and smiling at every well placed joke.

It was going well, better than expected. It was...nice.

And then Tommy rose from his seat.

At first Wilbur had been confused, had motioned urgently for his brother to sit the fuck back down *because dude you’re drawing attention to yourself!*, but the teenager had just hastily made his way to the front of the room where the microphone was propped, ears flushed red and hands fidgeting. Wilbur didn’t understand—why was he going up there? They were in the middle of a poetry reading, there was no reason...

He looked towards the front and there, lurking in the shadow of a support beam, was no other than Dream. The man motioned excitedly for Tommy to join him.

Wilbur’s eyes narrowed; what the fuck was Dream *doing*? Was he trying to draw his baby brother into some mischievous plot? He inched forward in his seat, buzzing with adrenaline as he watched Tommy slide next to Dream’s side, perfectly slotted by his left shoulder as if he had been there a thousand times before, as if he was meant to be there.

His stomach rolled.

“Epic! Let’s give our last performers a hand!” Karl cheered and the audience broke into thunderous applause—despite the fact that this was probably the tenth or so poem that had been read, the crowd’s energy had carried throughout the night, each performance being met with hollers of awe and congratulations, each poet bashfully tip-toeing to their seat to the flailing hands of their friends and good-natured pats on the back from strangers—and next to him, the other MC jumped up and down, as if unable to control his excitement.

Karl gave a half-glare to his partner. “Alright, while I would normally announce the next performer, Sappnap looks like he’s about to explode if I don’t let him do it—hey, *no*, no more fireworks, *please*. I can’t pay more hospital bills,” there was laughter like that, abrupt in only the way friends with an inside joke could be. Wilbur shifted in his seat, forcing a strained smile as Karl continued, exasperated, “but since I’m such a *nice* and *loving* boyfriend, I guess I’ll let him do the honors.”

“Thanks babe,” Sappnap said with a wink, and the audience broke into teasing coos and wolf-whistles, leaving Karl flushed, swatting playfully at the crowd. Sappnap grabbed ahold of the mic, a grin split across his face as he sucked in a breath and with practically the entirety of his being, shouted, “WHO’S READY FOR SOME MORE POETRY?”

Wilbur winced as the crowd cheered loudly, the group of thirty surprisingly rambunctious for some poets. He always thought these types of folks as shut-ins, as worn espresso drinkers smoking a cigarette in a black turtleneck, lamenting the weather and all the world’s bullshit; apparently, these poets were loud-mouthed, devil-may-care hippies who wore crazy earrings and laughed at horrible puns. Apparently, no one else thought that a bit disconcerting. On his

right, a member of the crowd had scooted forward in her seat, feet practically thumping upon the floor in excitement.

“I haven’t seen Dream do a duo in ages! This is going to be good, I can feel it!” She whispered to him, glittering eyes never leaving the front where Sapnap was hyping up the crowd.

“I-uh, I’m sorry. I’m not really sure what you mean. What is a duo?” Wilbur tried to keep his tone polite and pleasantly curious, but he could hear the shake of worry underlying every syllable. He cleared his throat self-consciously, and the woman next to him gave him a kind smile.

“Oh! First time? Well, a duo is a group piece with only two people—Dream usually does solo poems, I haven’t seen him do a duo in like two seasons! I can’t wait to see who he’s working with, the guy is super picky.” She prattled on, hands snapping absentmindedly as Sapnap and Karl began to introduce the next poets while subliminally advertising the cafe, to the delight of the crowd that chuckled at their antics.

Wilbur, however, was not amused. First of all, Dream wrote *poetry*? Sure, he knew the guy was affiliated with the arts—they had met in his freshman year of Dramatic Theater in college, after all, the kid had a natural talent for acting he seemed hell-bent on throwing down the drain, much to Wilbur’s ever-growing jealousy and chagrin—but there was no way in hell this man could possibly be a poet. He was loud and obnoxious and a jerk. *This has to be a prank, Tommy and him have to be pulling on my—*

“We had to get the second mic out for this crew! I am so pumped to welcome to the stage our final poets of the night...”

The woman next to him began to bounce in her seat excitedly. Wilbur was praying to every god that existed that this was all some joke.

“DREAM AND TOMMY WATSON!”

The little crowd rocked the house with their cheers, screaming as a man clothed in an eye-blindingly neon hoodie with fingerless black gloves walked up to a mic. Next to him stood a boy with a signature red hoodie and shock of blonde hair. The two adjusted their mics to the rowdy heckles of ‘mic work!’, before they both took out their phones, nervously fidgeting as they waited for the crowd to die down.

“Hello there, I’m Dream!” The audience thundered, and the man gave a quiet wheeze. Beside him, Wilbur’s baby brother anxiously bounced on the balls of his feet.

“And I’m Big Man Tommy! And, uh, this is our group poem entitled...” He glanced off to Dream, and at first Wilbur thought he was looking for permission to continue (a thought that had him practically boiling over in rage), before he realized with a sickening lurch that he was looking for *reassurance*. The teen was looking at Dream like the man hung the moon, and Dream looked at Tommy as if he was willing to tear it back down for the teen.

(Something dark and possessive tumbled in his gut, something he had worked so hard to keep down; he was supposed to be over this, he had gone to therapy and did his shadow-work *and he should be done with this*, but still he felt it gnaw at the linings of his stomach. He was going to *kill* Dream)

Dream gave Tommy a quick nod, a small incline of his head that meant nothing and everything at the same time—and yes, in some way it was a permission, an allowance for Tommy to take up the space Dream was cultivating for him, for him to start whatever debacle the two had concocted, but it was also a comfort. In just that little movement, Dream had said so much—*I'm here*, he had told Wilbur's little brother, *I've got you, we can do this...*

(And he knew that nod so well, because it had been the one he'd given Tommy on nighttime trips to the bathroom when the toddler was still too afraid to go by himself, it was the nod he gave when Tommy came home crying about homework and begged Wilbur for help—he knew what it meant, because for so many years, he had been the only one Tommy had needed)

Tommy sucked in a harsh breath, before a smile split across his face bright enough to put the spotlight fallen upon him to shame. “And this is our group poem entitled *Punchline!*”

And Wilbur realized too late that the bomb had already denoted long before he had ever touched down in the U.S.



# **“And I learned after:/everything that opens is a mouth./Every mouth will spit you right out.”**

## Chapter Notes

Title from “Plastic Bag from Corner Store Laments the Self” by Aliyah Cotton

Open mic pt.2! I wanted to give you guys more than just one chapter (especially one with more substance) because unfortunately I am moving into college next week and will probably not be able to post for a while as I settle in. I'm moving across the country so we shall see...how that goes lmao.

TWs: implied/referenced alcohol abuse, implied/referenced physical abuse and childhood neglect, self deprecating thoughts, thoughts of self-harm/self-destruction, familial arguments, referenced death of family member, self hate, therapists.

Phew, this one is a heavier one, let me know if I missed any major warnings.

Of course, take care, stay safe!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy’s absolute favorite thing about performing poetry was the breath you took before you spoke. In that small inhale, as air cycled through his lungs before pushing itself back out through his throat, it felt as if the entire world waiting for him to exhale. Puffy has spent hours having them practice the mere act of breathing, *a breath can tell you all you needed to know about the person performing in front of you*, she had said face twisted into that sly smile of hers that always meant she had a card up her sleeve, *a creaking gasp can tell you if they are nervous*, *a heavy lungful if they are preparing for battle*, and *this team will always breathe as if they are dedicating their lungs to something greater to themselves. You will breathe as if it’s all you were built to do, and then you will begin.*

Tommy had at first struggled with that concept—all humans were meant to breathe, that’s literally how they functioned—but he soon realized that she wasn’t talking about the physiological act of breathing, she was talking about what lay beneath, what metaphor behind the curtain of the first read. What differentiated a performance from a regular reading was that even the way the poet breathed was purposeful, it was insistent; every line was said with care, with reverence, and every breath was treated the same. So Tommy practiced in his everyday life, counting the inhales and exhales they were coupled with in his bedroom at midnight, muttering to himself what each oxygen molecule was an ode to as it found itself a home in his bloodstream, allowing it to escape as carbon dioxide and bloom into a poem. He breathed, and suddenly, he had understood.

Now, standing in front a group of thirty or some odd poets and one stranger, he couldn't help the way his breath caught in his throat, how it choked him and left his chest hollow and too full all at once. He didn't know how he could do this, how he could open himself up to be seen as he truly was, for them to scrutinize each bubble of oxygen bouncing in his veins and each gush of air in the flaps of his lungs; there were so many odes hiding within him, and he was afraid that they'd see who they were dedicated to.

And yet, next to Dream who stood with his shoulders thrown back as if facing an army, already victorious in the curl of his lips and flexing of his fingers around his phone case, Tommy felt the weight in his chest become a bit lighter. *The thing about group poems*, the older blonde had said, eyes flickering like leaves tumbling from willows arcing across the sky, *is that you're never alone. There's always someone there to lift you up if you stumble.*

Tommy's heart pounded against his ribcage as Dream gave him a small, subtle nod, nudging him to the starting line, and Tommy watched as the man's chest inflated with air. The teen followed suit.

And together, they breathed.

"Self loathing and Consciousness walk into a bar," they say in unison, and with that they begin crafting a universe, hands delving into space together as they weave. Dream picks up a thread, voice echoing as he continues, "and of course, it's the beginning of a joke, because what would you be if not the funny friend with not enough to laugh about..."

"So it goes like this," they start, Dream a jester waiting to pounce, hands splayed wide, Tommy an exasperated tag-along who has seen this all before. Despite the nerves, he can feel himself slowly fall into the poem and its characters, Consciousness tearing itself from the page to stand in his shoes.

Tommy's arms fall limp to his sides and he gives a frustrated sigh, motioning to his partner next to him, "Self Loathing arrives twenty minutes late and asks the bartender to open a tab," and Dream butts in with a quick, "of which only *he* will be paying," and the audience chuckles a bit. Tommy feels a surge of confidence begin to fill his chest, and his shoulders fall backwards in determination. "And the first round begins."

Tommy gives Dream a disparaging look. "Self Loathing is already on his psycho-analyzing bullshit says—"

"You take while knowing you can never teach your hands what it means to be full," and it's as if a flip was switched. Gone is the well-worn banter between these two halves, and the Dream's invisible hands sink their claws into their universe, knocking planets out of orbit and dimming galaxies. Dream's face morphs into a sneer, voice harsh and cold, sending Tommy's heart pounding, "hours spent clinging to the phone waiting for friends to call just to never pick up - you are most at home in the rusted static of a voice-mail, in runaway Goodbyes and Hellos at arms length."

Tommy prepares an inhale. "And so I ask for a drink."

They breathe together: "*Take a shot.*"

Where Dream is ice, Tommy is kindling. His voice is gentler as he speaks, thoughtful, the cautious executioner of the universe, his tugs on their threaded galaxy tender and soft. He mourns and weaves, words flowing into entangled threads as he reads from his phone: “You snap a wisecrack across your knee and tell your friends about the siblings you will never know, poking fun at empty bedrooms conquered by dust and distance.”

“On bad nights, you lay outside the threshold and slide your smallest finger underneath the doorway,” Dream remarks, bordering on mocking, toeing the edge of pitying, “cuticles carpet-burned and pink, imagining someone else’s nail bed just within reach.”

*“Take a shot.”*

“When you were ten...” Tommy starts and his voice begins to waver. Next to him Dream stiffens; throughout their countless practices, for some reason *this* had been the section that always got him choked up. It was where he stumbled, where he stopped to tear at his hair and muffle a frustrated scream. *I don’t get it!*, he had tried to say, to apologize, *why does this line mess me up? Why is this one so hard?*

Dream had given him a sympathetic smile, and said:

*Because it’s the line that hurts.*

Tommy squeezed his eyes closed, wrestling a breath out of his chest. Quietly, he dedicated the carbon dioxide to the words he said next and the man sitting in the back row watching. Next to him, Dream’s exhale sighs something patient and soft.

He opens his eyes.

“When you were ten, you could block out *anything* with the hums of a video game cartridge slotted into a gameboy...”

Dream fights a smile, and Tommy knows it’s one of pride. “TV static.”

“Yelling,” Tommy adds.

“Window shatter.”

“Slammed doors,” Tommy finishes, and their lungs inflate in unison as they speak, the universe they’ve built pulsing with energy, “now, you’ve traded pixels with sweated bedsheets and empty cups cemented to desktops. *Take a shot.*”

“You don’t clean your room,” Dream spits, “content to live pigsty.”

“Your closet door will not slide shut because of its rusted hinges you do not ask your father to oil.”

*“You do not ask your father for anything,”* and this is the only time the two halves will be a whole. No longer are they kindling and ice, river-rock and sea foam—they are two wolves dancing in eye-aching moonlight. They are night-born and howling. They are one, “he has already taught you how this joke goes: Self Loathing and Consciousness walk into a bar—“

“—and your father keeps beer bottles by the TV set,” Dream does not stumble, he does not flinch, but he is raw and vulnerable and this is the line that hurts, and his voice echoes chasms of grief. He mourns, and the world watches, “you’re taught by age nine how to use an opener. The first time you try to pry off an aluminum lid, you slice the soft pads of your thumb open. That night you learn to get blood out of carpet and cry for hours.”

(And Tommy wishes he could do that, allow himself to cup the weakest part of himself in his hands and let it roll out from under his grasp. When Dream creates universes, each thread is thumbled over with care, with love—even the threads that cut and burn, even the threads that threaten to knot, they are treated as if they are the locks of a lover)

“Your father does not stay home; at age ten you teach yourself to use a stove and sear the face of a spatular into your palm the first time you try to make eggs.” And though it is a memory well-loved by laughter and wild hyperbole, traded back and forth between friends and acquaintances alike, Tommy allows himself to hold it close for the first time. Dream had taught him that to write a memory on the page was to cradle it, was to run your hands along its skin and memorize all its freckles and scabs, and so Tommy allows his hands to press down upon the memory’s wound. “So you get sick on take-out and scrub down the bathroom sink once your father goes to sleep. Your friends say you smell like bleach in the mornings; they laugh when you say you’re in the business of drinking a cup before bed.”

*“And there’s a mother underground somewhere, with a missing face and your smile, and your father claims he does not remember her.”* Their universe is expanding, is eating away at the light in the room, at the stars glowing steadily on the ceiling. It is stealing the air from the room. *“Your father does not remember your fifteenth/nineteenth birthday. Take a shot.”*

“And you’re afraid,” the admission is a gasp, is tender, and Tommy revels in it, “you’re afraid that one day you’ll look in the mirror—“

“—and see that you look *exactly* like him.” Dream does not admit—he confesses; a purge. His voice is venomous and angry and *terrified* and blazing with honesty.

“The last revenants of your relationship found in the color of your eyes,” they say together, “the strands of your hair.”

“Self loathing tells you to burn it off.”

“Consciousness tells you that this is a trick mirror.”

*“I want to tell you that this is all a trick,”* they say, and they open the palms towards the audience. Tommy continues, “one elaborate prank.”

“A joke.”

*“Because the punchline has to have hit already.”*

“Because the funny friend is still performing—“ Tommy starts, and Dream pounces upon the tail end of the line, “—and no one is laughing. Of course...”

Their howls transform into thunder, the streamers into lightning: “Because how can I be the funny friend if I’m not constantly cauterizing my wounds into a stand up routine? Because I’m still performing and *no one is laughing* and the bottle is empty. *Take. A. Shot.*”

They huff an exhale, breathing heavily as the velocity of their performance begins to slow. He wasn’t sure when his eyes had started to mist, but he blinks away the tears threatening to spill over; Dream has begun to roll out his shoulders, the tension fading away from his muscles as the adrenaline begins to thrum out of them. Puffy liked to explain the flow of a poem as a landscape, with mountains and cliffedges and plateaus.

Here, they would end in a ravine.

“On the last day of eight grade, you get the superlative for Class Clown.” Tommy’s voice is weighed down, exhausted. He has felt so much in these last three minutes, knows there will be a responding echo to his words against the darkened caverns of this poem’s end. “During lunch, your friends laugh and tell you there’s never been a more perfect fit.”

Dream enters the ravine, voice dripping with the damp moss that spreads across its walls. “That night, you go home to a father asleep on the couch and kitchen lights blown out. The only light is from the flicker of infomercials on a buzzing television.”

“You turn it off and draw a blanket to your father’s chest. You tell him goodnight...”

“...you pretend he says it back. On your way to your room you pass by his liquor cabinet.”

They halt, bated breath as the final tension of the poem begins to unwind itself. They can hear the audience shuffle in their quiet, leaves wind-chiming against each other as the wind unsettles them—the can hear the audience start to grasp at the frayed ends of their tapestry.

Dream does not inhale; it is up to Tommy to decide when to begin the end. He stalls, tongue running across the backside of his teeth as he considers this universe they have made. For the first time in the comforting darkness of the coffee shop, he looks into the audience and *sees*. There, sitting in the back row, ramrod straight and glasses reflecting the blue lights dancing above him, is his brother. His face is unreadable, his eyes blank, and all Tommy can grasp, is the frown upon his face.

So Tommy starts.

“You pause.” He says, and Dream follows him. The man next to him sighs, deep and full of grief. “You pretend you didn’t.”

Tommy and Dream exhale; the audience does not.

“*Take. A. Shot.*”

The ravine is silent.

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The silence does not last, because as soon as Tommy and Dream nod their thanks and begin to step away from the mic, the room erupts into applause. There are cheers and feet pounding

upon the floor, folks yelling out the duo's names and awing over their work; it's the same over-enthusiastic love that each poem has got, but there's something more euphoric about it, something cathartic about screaming after the last poem of the night—a poem written by *Dream and Tommy*.

There's a part of Wilbur that is still hoping that it's a prank, that Tommy will go up to the mic last minute and shout *sike! gotcha!*, but the MCs walk to the front of the room and begin winding down the slam, thanking all the performers (thanking *Tommy*, because Tommy is a slam poet and oh, God, is this what he's been hiding? Is this what has been...*changing* his little brother?) and reminding the audience of the shop's latest discount on baked goods, and Tommy is still standing next to Dream, a smile on his face so bright it rivals the sun.

(And it *burns*, it burns Wilbur so much that he covers his face with his hands, palms cool and clammy against his cheeks)

His mind is racing, it's breaking itself apart into shattered puzzle pieces and struggles to put the shards together. This doesn't—*Tommy isn't a poet*. The kid isn't some wordsmith: Tommy is his baby brother who bitches about someone drinking the last of the milk and his homework, who has Dad lamenting over the phone about his messy room (and shit, that line bounces around Wilbur's skull before he can stop himself—*You don't clean your room... content to live pigsty...you don't ask your father for anything*—and he wants to scream), Tommy is just a teenager with a foul attitude and fouler mouth. *Tommy is his brother*.

And yet, as the poets around him stand and begin to socialize, Wilbur can only see a complete and utter stranger. There is nothing recognizable left upon his baby brother's face and Wilbur is trying to act as if the world is not ending. Because sitting there, eyes pinned on a teenage boy laughing loudly with unfamiliar faces, boney elbows jutting into someone's side and jokes sliding easily off his tongue, Wilbur realizes that he has lost. And it is irreplaceable.

Quietly, he thinks to himself he ought to mourn.

(But Wilbur does not do well with loss, he does not grieve—he *drowns*. So, still frozen to his seat with his head in his hands, he allows the water to fill his lungs)

“Wilbur!” A reedy voice cheered, and he looks up to see Tommy rushing towards him, blue eyes alight with uncontrollable pride. Wilbur's stomach drops to his feet, and he does not move. Tommy surges forward, hands clapping together in his excitement as he launches into a ramble. “Did you see that? Holy shit, that was *so cool!* I thought I was gonna choke up there, I mean, I did, but I recovered! Dream said I did a great job, he thought that I landed the last line well and I can't believe Dream and I—hey, Will, are you alright?”

And Tommy is staring at him with that look, the one that meant he was waiting for Wilbur to pass judgement, to validate or reject him—it was the look of an eight year old desperate for his older brother's approval, desperate to make Wilbur proud.

(It was a look that didn't sit right on this stranger's face)

So Wilbur did what any drowning man did...

“Tommy, get in the fucking car. *Now.*”

He pulled Tommy down with him.

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The walk back to the car had been silent. Wilbur had fallen just short of frog-marching Tommy out of the cafe (much to the alarm and protest of Dream, but Will had seemingly paid him no mind), and Tommy’s head was spinning as he was escorted to the old SUV and ushered inside. He was still riding the high of his performance, still glowing with accomplishment because *holy shit they really did that!* He did that! It had been magic, standing up there, basking in the hollers and snaps of his fellow artists; he had done it, he had proved to Dream that he was a Poet.

*And you proved it to Wilbur, too*, something inside him minded smugly, even as his older brother slammed Tommy’s car-door a bit harder than necessary, even as Dream stood anxiously in front of Kinoko’s, watching as Wilbur began circled around the car to the driver’s seat, *you finally said all those things you’ve kept bottled inside. You’ve finally made him see you.* The realization sent a thrill through him, and he rubbed away the goosebumps that had appeared upon his arm; he knew he should be dreading this conversation, knew that nothing good could come from an angry Wilbur and confined spaces, but he was still so *euphoric*. He had performed in front of people, actual, real-life people, and they had been *poets*. And they had welcomed him, oh, how they had wrapped him in hugs and patted him on the back as he were a friend, as if he were apart of their secret world.

(A Poet, that was what he was now, wasn’t he? He was a Poet, an artist, a creator; he was the man upon a high wire, the soft hands rising to meet the wind’s bitter cold, he was the sorcerer turned wordsmith, the student who stayed after class to read classics, the spell caster, the flowers of which bees laid upon and butterflies rest—he was a *Poet*)

Wilbur slammed the car door, and Tommy turned to him, unable to smother the grin plastered across his face. “Will! I—“

“Are you out of your fucking mind?” Wilbur’s hands were gripping the steering wheel as though trying to rip it off of its axel, faced forward and refusing to meet Tommy’s gaze. Tommy felt the color drain from his face, and his fingers twitched where they lay curled in his lap. Wilbur’s lips were curled into a nasty snarl, dark eyes ablaze as he stared at the 2hr parking sign in front of them. “You’ve got some fucking nerve, going up there like that. What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

“I—what? Will, what the hell are you talking about?”

“Is that where you get off? Just-just talking shit about your family in front of a group of strangers? Is that fun for you, huh? It’s fun to make us all look like assholes at some stupid open mic.” Wilbur turned his key in the ignition and started the engine. Tommy opened his mouth to retort, to tell his brother that he was being unreasonable, when the car lurched as Wilbur sped out of his parking spot, ignoring Tommy’s shouts of alarm.

“Dude! You can’t just back out like that, we could’ve—“

“Oh, like you’d care,” Wilbur hissed, eyes flicking to the rearview as he made a quick turn, dodging parked cars, “seriously, what the fuck is wrong with you? You went up there and—and... Tommy, you talked shit on all of us! You made Dad look like he was-was abusive! Do you know how bad that looks?”

“Oh come on!” Tommy couldn’t help but groan, throwing his hands up. “It’s not like that, I was just expressing myself—“

“Oh! You were just *expressing yourself*!” Wilbur let out a bitter laugh, a mocking smile pulling at his lips. “Of course, because ‘expressing yourself’ includes implicating your father in a potential CPS visit! Because ‘expressing yourself’ means making it sound like you’re a poor, neglected child who uses alcohol to cope with his miserable little existence. News flash, Tommy! So many people have it worse than you!”

“I know that!” He argued, and his face flushed red in anger, in humiliation. He wasn’t stupid; he knew people had it worse than him, he had friends that struggled with things he couldn’t even imagine handling, but still... it hurt. It hurt growing up alone, having to teach himself life skills, experiencing milestones that Phil hadn’t bothered to be around for. But he didn’t—he didn’t *lie*. Everything he said was the *truth*. He would never lie about his father, he wouldn’t. And sure, poetry made everything so much more dramatic and sure, it was hard to differentiate Tommy from the persona he was embodying, but he didn’t lie for attention. Wilbur had to have known that, right? “I know, but I didn’t say anything that wasn’t true! And it’s *my* art Will, *my* feelings, you don’t-you don’t get to dictate what’s true and what’s not.”

(Later, he would be proud of himself for setting that boundary for himself, for his artwork, and Puffy would’ve given him a high-five. Now, though, he was doing his best not to cry)

“No, but I can tell you when you’re wrong, and your ‘feelings’ are *wrong*, Tommy. You’re acting like a selfish child.” Wilbur sighed, rubbing his temples in frustration, as if this was just a scolding for an unruly teen, as if Tommy was just a bother. Tommy’s nails dug into his palm. “You think that going up there, spouting some flowery, sad bullshit makes you grown? Makes you right? Fuck, give me a break, Toms. You’re just a teen with a nasty attitude and no respect. It doesn’t make you special, it doesn’t make you superior—you’re just a fucking kid with an anger problem, and that’s all you’ll ever be until you fucking *grow up*.”

And there it was; *selfish*, they called him, and swatted him away like a pest. *Selfish*, the taunted, voices echoing in his ears as he locked himself in bathrooms and fought the urge to bash his head into the porcelain sink, as he sobbed and screamed to an empty house, the only comfort the echoing of his wails on tiled walls. He was *selfish*, he was a burden, and of course he had always been that way—there was a reason he had never known his mother, why Phil had taken down all the photographs of her from the walls and refused to speak about her. There was a reason why Kristin Watson was no longer alive, and of course that reason was *Tommy*.

So wasn’t Wilbur right? Yes, he was selfish, yes, he was a child and full of shit, and nasty and foul, because what else could he have been? The first thing he had known was death, and for bringing it into the Watson household he had damned himself to being alone. It was due punishment for daring to be born, and sometimes, it felt as though it wasn’t enough.



*(But it wasn't my fault! he wanted to cry, plead for them to understand, no one was there! No one was there to show me how to be—who was supposed to show me how to be better? You left! You all left! But he did not cry, and so no one heard)*

Right now, he knew it would never be enough. Wilbur would never be able to forgive him for taking away his mother, Techno would always treat him as a curiosity (and wasn't he? A little boy made of death and grief, what a fun puzzle to play with), and *Phil*...Phil would always look at him and see this wife's murderer wearing his face.

There was no way for him to apologize, to bring back what he had stolen from them; no poems would ever fill the hole that he'd dug, and he was stupid for thinking so.

Next to him, Wilbur was gritting his teeth. If Tommy strained, he could swear there were the pin-pricks of tears in the corners of his brother's eyes.

(How could it ever be enough?)

And so what was he to say to that? What could he do but admit to Wilbur that he was right? There were no excuses, no explanations—Tommy was selfish. That was the bottom line, the truth.

So he did.

"Because I am a maker of poems," Tommy's voice finally cut through the silence of the car, soft and regretful. He ignored the sharp inhale of the man next to him, glancing out the window; he could see Dream still standing in front of the coffee shop, fists stuffed into his front hoodie and face shadowed by the night. He knew what Dream would have said. Tommy licked his chapped lips and shut his eyes, pressing his cheek against the cool glass—he had to do this, he had to say it, "And you a maker of music..."

"What?" Wilbur sputtered, finally turning out of the parking lot, attention split between avoiding an accident and listening to the words tumbling out of Tommy's mouth. "What are you—"

"Because I am a maker of poems," he started again, and this time he spoke as if he carried the world on his tongue, an Atlas of his own invention. This was his burden to bear; he could not apologize to Kristin, to the family who had loved her, but he could do *this*. He could make the sacrifice. He pulled his gaze away from the fading twinkle of Kinoko's fairy lights and Dream's lone figure—the home he could not allow himself to return to. Tommy's lips pressed thin in determination as he forced himself to continue, "And you a maker of music..."

"Tommy..." An exhaled sigh.

"You tell me the word pristine was *perfect*." He spat, and just like that it was done.

That night, Tommy had felled death again to what he loved.

Puffy received a text the next morning saying he would not be competing in the slam, and a family of four became a family of three.

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His first therapy session had been in a run down office complex with untamed ivy on the front gate. He had only gone because Niki had pushed and pushed about it for so many months, to the point that even Eret needed to intervene, and in retaliation Wilbur had chosen the most whack-job, outrageous, unconventional therapist in the entirety of London.

Dr. Collins, or ‘Evelyn’ as she was adamant on being called, was a thirty-four year old woman who specialized in pet therapy with a bad habit of collecting wooden carvings of goats. She played Daryl Hall & John Oates at the beginning of each session and forced Wilbur to get up and ‘get out the shakes’ when he was ‘unnecessarily bottling up emotions and damaging his mental health’, and she took special care to ask him his favorite scent so she could burn a candle during their appointments. That all wasn’t to mention that since she was a pet therapist, he was encouraged if not ordered to play with her puppy Rocky (an unassuming Australian Shepherd mix that had the tendency to lay his head upon Wilbur’s lap if his heart rate picked up, lover of gourmet dog-treats), and often found himself returning from her appointments covered in dog-hair.

Suffice to say, Wilbur had hit the jack-pot.

(Niki hadn’t been as amused, but said she was proud of him for getting help anyhow, and so their conflict had been settled)

The first few sessions with Dr. Collins were awkward to say the least. Wilbur had spent the first forty minutes anxiously rambling about his schooling and roommates, unable to define himself outside of the fixtures of everyday life; he was a music production and theater arts major with a bad habit of missing discussion sections and staying up past 3am; he lived with three other uni students that all were in an up-start indie band; he wrote songs about ex-girlfriends and missing his train and homesickness; he had a twin, his complimentary half, his complete opposite; he was an older brother; his middle name was Soot.

“Apparently when I was born, my mother said I scrunched my face up like I had just inhaled soot from the fireplace, said that’s what gave her the idea for my middle name.” He had explained, fiddling with the white-plastic lid of his commuter cup as Rocky curled up by his feet. Across from him, Dr. Collins had given a surprised hum, tapping her acrylic nails on the arm of her chair. “Yeah, I know, right? If you think that name’s weird, you should hear about my other brothers—Techno is short for ‘Technoblade’, which apparently was an old friend of my father’s from way back, and my little brother is actually named ‘Theseus’, though Techno gave him that one. I guess I’m the ‘normal one’ or whatever.”

“Do you feel like that? That you’re the ‘normal one’?” Dr. Collins said in that voice that was too airy, that voice that meant she was actually asking a question that would probably result in tears and a quiet night locked in his room when he got back to his apartment.

He awkwardly shifted one knee to rest upon the other, disturbing the puppy that slumbered at his feet, causing Rocky to whine. He fought off a small smile. “Sometimes it feels like it, sometimes I feel like I’m the most abnormal person on earth. I mean, my father was a tech genius that barely spoke to my younger brother and I other than when I yelled at him for it, and sure, we talk now and it’s *fine*, but I can’t just forget those five or so years where I was left alone with a toddler. My twin was a fencing prodigy who got a big-time scholarship at

Amherst College, and he's just, I don't know, like my dad? He's good at what he does, they both are, and I'm a moody drama major in *England* of all places."

"I think you're good at what you do. You love music, and from what I've heard, you're more than just 'good' at it. Why does that make you different from your family?" Dr. Collins continued her rhythm of nails on armrest; Wilbur tried to find a coherent melody in the tapping.

"I-I guess I just am. Different. I was always the..." he sucked his front teeth, a grimace overcoming him, "the sensitive one, out of place. The one my father couldn't understand, that neither of them could understand. They treated me like I was...like I was a bomb waiting to blow, or a villain. There were so many nights where I thought they'd be better if I'd just—" At his feet Rocky whined, and Wilbur bit his lip. "I'll admit, it wasn't entirely his fault, it was...hard, after my mother's death: none of us knew how to deal with mourning her and taking care of a newborn baby, and my dad was suddenly trying to cover the expenses of her medical bills and the funeral costs and having to be both Mom and Dad. It wasn't easy dealing with Techno becoming a social recluse and my... 'anger issues'. And Tommy was just..."

He stalled, unable to find the words to wrap around what those first few years had been like, coming home from the hospital with his mother *gone*, nothing more than a few framed photos on the wall and a memory. That all that was left of her was a squirming, wailing baby, skin flush with pink and face always squished into an ugly frown—Tommy had been an unhappy infant, one of late-night screaming and refused formula-milk. At first, Wilbur had hated the thing: why did Tommy get to cry? As if he knew their mother, as if he was able to grieve someone he never even met—why did this stupid baby get to scream and wail and sob, and Wilbur had to cry alone at night under the covers?

(His hate was quick to dissipate, because truly Tommy was a *great* little brother. He was sweet and courteous, and sure he was a bit of terror when he wanted to be, but when he laughed it was as if the entire world stilled just to hear it. Wilbur had grown up thinking that Tommy was the greatest gift they could have ever been given, and even if Mom wasn't there anymore, even if Wilbur would never get to lay his head upon her chest and just *hug* her, Tommy had been his bright spot in a dark time)

"He was just added pressure," Wilbur finally settled on, "that we didn't really...that we couldn't really handle. It didn't help that Techno and I were only eight and had no idea how to deal with a little brother, and Dad was just...*really* struggling.."

"That must've been hard, and you should be proud of yourself for getting through that and coping as best you can." Wilbur found himself wilting under the praise: had he coped? He didn't think so. There were enough shattered cups and slammed doors as evidence to that. "I want to divert our attention a little bit. You mention Tommy a lot but we haven't really gotten to talk about him—can you tell me about your guy's relationship?"

Wilbur's face broke into a smile unwillingly, fragile and hopeful. "Tommy is my little brother," he couldn't help but beam, voice heavy with pride, "I practically raised that kid. I'd walk to his daycare after class and pick him up, take him home and feed him and entertain him. I taught him how to tie his shoes, read to him, sang him lullabies when Dad came home

late from work—I was his best friend, and he was mine.” It was more than that: he was Tommy’s entire world, and Tommy was his entire *universe*. Every spare thought was consumed by his little brother, wondering if he could get the kid to eat his veggies today, if the five-year old would like the new song he’d learn on guitar, if there was any way to sneak him out of the house to go to the OC Fair while Phil was out of the house, when he needed to sleep and when he needed to bathe, what Tommy thought of him...

Tommy had been everything to Wilbur.

(And he knew, deep down, that he had been everything to his brother too, once. That he had been the one to comfort him after nightmares and gift him memories of their mother like trinkets upon a bedside table. Wilbur had pulled his first tooth, had taught him his maths and helped him change his clothes everyday until he was old enough to do it himself)

No child was fit to raise another, he knew that now, but at the time this fact had been buried underneath so many nights of changing diapers and packing lunches that Wilbur had truly believed he was the only one who could properly take care of Tommy. A part of him still believed that the blonde-haired boy in California was still *his*.

“You said he ‘was’ your best friend. What changed?”

Oh. What *had* changed?

It was slow, that was for sure; Wilbur had already spent half of his life taking care of a baby brother no one had asked for, that had been just as unexpected as his mother’s death, and it was all really a matter of time before it all blew up in their faces. There had been so many years of missed sleepovers and birthday parties (because Tommy was alone at home and couldn’t fend for himself and Wilbur was *the only one there*), of harsh words whispered in hallways when the toddler was asleep and night had fell—by the time he was sixteen, Wilbur was thoroughly burned out from having to care for his little brother, and he had resented the kid for stealing away his adolescence. So Wilbur spiraled; he smoked, he skipped class, he drank, he did all that came in the Teenage Rebellion Handbook. He wanted Phil to know he was hurting, wanted him to understand what the man had reduced him to, to finally give his family a good reason for why they labeled him a villain.

So he pushed away his little brother, because without Tommy he was nothing, and as nothing he would finally be free to self destruct. And when Phil wouldn’t let him, he packed up his bags and went to London.

Wilbur smiled, a broken little thing, and opened his mouth:

(‘Pristine’, Tommy would call it someday, in a car with the radio silent and windows rolled up: unspoiled, perfect, spotless. The truth remained intact, preserved in its sterility as if doused in alcohol, and no warping of Wilbur’s mind or Tommy’s poems could alter it. Wilbur had escaped that house and its inhabitants, took one look at the world that waited for him beyond the weathered porch, and left; Tommy had stayed, too young to do more than watch his universe implode into dazed stars, he stayed with a father who was unable to move past his grief, an empty house of only memories and echoes, and *grew up to be just like him*.)

(And for that Wilbur would never forgive himself)

“I left.”

Wilbur guessed Tommy was right, ‘pristine’—it was perfect.

It really was.

## Chapter End Notes

The poem Tommy quotes to Wilbur is "Pristine" by Hilda Raz, and it is absolutely gorgeous. I'd totally check it out.

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my family, watching me type like a maniac for 10+hours: zeeskeit, you want some water?

me, having wrote 12k of two different chapters about minecraft in the span of one day post wisdom teeth removal while ignoring packing, setting up my class schedule, or completing an actual poetry assignment, and also writing 3k for a chapter that doesn't exist yet: SOMEBODY SEDATE ME!

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A poem has finally been revealed! Honestly, writing a persona poem group piece from the POV of two fiction characters was one of the most difficult poems I have ever written, so I am exhausted. Also I hope this is not the worst poem ever written but! only time can tell! Hopefully the performance is at least readable lol - I might publish a chapter with the poems in print so you can read them all the way through without Tommy's inner monologue!

Also I def overused the words 'breathed' and 'mourned' this chapter and I cannot do anything about it anymore

Again, might not see you guys for a while but I hope you enjoyed this chapter and I hope you have a great day :) Until I next see you guys, drop some poetry recs for me to give me things to read in my lonely dorm room lol!

# **“the only way to run through the neighborhood/was to run through it together,”**

## Chapter Notes

Title from "Teenage Riot" by Matthew Dickman

HI GUYS!!! IT'S BEEN A WHILE!

First, I really should apologize for taking so long to update - college has been a whirlwind (some good, some bad, all new and terrifying) and I had writer's block for so long as I tried to figure out how to do this chapter. Still, I don't want to plague you with an array of life updates, so I'll save that for the end notes in case you're curious as to how ol' zeeskeit is doing haha.

Again, thank you so so much for all the love and support you've shown this fic - it was honestly so uplifting and comforting to see your guys' comments as I settled in to this whole new world, so thank you!

Last, but not least, reminder that this fic is about the characters and not related to the content creators in any way! This chapter gets a bit heavy, so I just wanted to put that out there. Main Warnings: implied suicide attempt, memory loss from trauma, internalized ableism and ableist rhetoric (in regards to c!Tubbo's dyslexia), divorce, and reckless/dangerous driving. Please stay safe! These next few chapters are going to be a bit more rough.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Puffy was worried.

Of course, she was always fretting over something; as the designated Slam Mom and Captain of their little crew, she was always keeping an eye on her teammates (texting Ponk to see if they had gotten home okay or needed a ride, calling Foolish to remind him to turn off the stove before he left for practice, checking up on their youngest member to make sure he was comfortable at practice, and just...*being there* for Dream), and so many of her waking hours were spent worrying over the multiple people in her life who jokingly called her Momma Puffy, making check-list upon check-list to ensure she was doing her best by those she cared for. Sure, sometimes it was overwhelming having so many people depend on you (and sometimes, late at night when she had pulled down the blinds to her windows and shut her door, she would heave panicked, hurried breaths, trying to get in enough air to tell herself that she did it, *that they are okay, it's all okay*—), but still she loved it more than she'd be willing to admit. There was something in her that hummed in satisfaction each time she could help her teammates with something and see nothing but a smile in return, bright and crooked in its sincerity. She loved seeing her teammates smile, loved seeing them laugh and joke and shout

hyperbole at one another and just *revel* in what life had to offer. More than anything, she loved making her poets happy, that's it.

So yes, when Puffy had called Dream at 2am rambling that Tommy had suddenly pulled out of the slam, thanking her for a 'good run' and declining all of her calls, she had understandably been on the edge of hysterics. At first she thought she was just overreacting—Tommy was fine, he probably just got cold feet after his first open mic. It would all be better in the morning, she assured herself, toeing the line that led to plummeting into a downwards spiral.

She had teetered over that edge as soon as Dream told her what had happened at the open mic.

Puffy was not an irrational person; she knew that sometimes poets, especially new poets like Tommy, got stage fright and that one bad experience could set them back months in terms of building confidence to perform, but this wasn't just a 'bad experience' for the kid or a hiccup. Because according to Dream, Tommy's performance had been more than good: it had been *stunning*.

*He's a natural at this shit*, he'd praised over the phone, voice tinny with awe and telephone wires, *you should've seen him up there. It was his first group piece and he perfectly matched my energy without hesitating - the chemistry was amazing! And even when he stumbled you couldn't even tell, he was perfect!*

(Neither had to mention that this was very high praise from Dream, who infamously hated most group performances because *they just don't get how to flow together! They're not cohabitating the piece!*, and who was judgmental at best and snobby at worst when it came to poetry. It wasn't that he didn't respect his fellow artists, he was just very stingy in how far he was willing to let that respect extend. And when Tommy had first been put on the team, taking the place of Dream's close friend Quackity, who had left the team after a fall-out with his boyfriends...well, Dream had made it *very* clear that he wasn't going to go easy on the kid)

Because even if he had excelled at the challenge Dream had offered, it was what happened after the open mic that had Puffy's heart shriveling in panic.

"He dragged him out of there? What do you mean? And you didn't do anything?" Puffy knew her voice was shrill, knew from the frustrated sigh on the otherwise of the phone that she was blaming the wrong person, but she was fraying at the edges. "Was he hurt? Do you know for sure it was his brother? It could've been a random stranger, or-or a kidnapper! Oh God..."

"Puffs! Dude, chill—his brother is a dick, yeah, but he wasn't kidnapped, that's for sure." And she could tell by how Dream's voice dipped an octave, warm and malleable like sun-dried sand underfoot, that he was trying not to panic too, that he was trying to hold it together for *her*. She felt her stomach roll. "He hasn't responded to any of my insta DMs, which, yeah, is a bad sign. But! Last night was rough; he's probably just trying to process or something. Don't-don't read too much into this. Please."

*Please*, Dream had said, and Puffy felt like her world might be ending. Because Dream never asked for anything, never begged, but all it took was the aftermath of a nighttime slam; *please* he had said, as if the very thought of something happening to Tommy would shatter him; *please*, because even though they had only known Tommy for about two months, he had become such an integral part of the team that without him it would all fall to pieces. He was the glue that kept them together—the one to banter with Ponk and get the poet’s nervous energy out, the only one that could keep up with Foolish’s waxed-poetic juxtaposed with his boggling misunderstanding of everything that isn’t intellectualized, the one who could challenge Dream and not falter under his critical stare, and he was the only one who could bring out the chaotic side of Puffy during practice and get away with it—but more than that, he was the *baby*. Puffy had to stop herself from *aww*-ing at the boy multiple times throughout practice, heart melting with every excited squeal he made when Foolish brought cookies from Kinoko’s to practice, wanting to coo every time he gave a nervous smile, flickering and so *small*, as he read the newest draft of his poem aloud. Sure, he was seventeen years old and mature for his age (sometimes to the point that Puffy worried, because what seventeen year old had *that* look in his eye?), but they all felt protective over their youngest poet. Dream especially.

*(I feel connected to him, like we’re two sides of the same coin, like we’re buzzing on a frequency no one else can channel*, he had said once, sitting on Puffy’s couch and pretending to watch *Pride and Prejudice*, though by the misty gleam in his eyes she had been able to tell he wasn’t too concerned with Elizabeth Bennet on screen, *not even that, he just...I’m not sure. He feels familiar*. And she knew then that he had meant like family, like a little brother)

Dream was a very private man, always hiding his true feelings behind unimpressed glares and wry commentary, but he was so very, very *fragile* just like the rest of them. It had taken years for Dream to open up enough to Puffy for her to coax the his life-story out of him, years of reading in between lines of poetry and half-assed jokes alike, but when he had finally bore his soul to her, he had latched onto her as if a duckling imprinting upon its mother. And so he was just that, her Duckling, her hatchling—the boy turned man too fast, who couldn’t stand the sight of bottle caps or broken glass, the poet who treated his friends as if they were each a work of art, who cradled each person he loved so close to his chest she thought he’d suffocate, who taught himself to leap from rooftop to rooftop because he liked the feeling of splitting wind, because he liked heights, so much so that she was afraid one day it would ruin him—the boy who had become her little brother. He was *her* Duckling, and she was his.

And if you were Dream’s, he would never let you go.

So Dream said *please*, and Puffy began to unravel. Because if Tommy was hurt, if...if *That* had happened to him, Dream would be unable to recover; Tommy had become Dream’s, and so, the man would tear apart the Earth for him. And all Tommy would have to do was ask.

“We’re going to find him,” she found herself saying, phone sandwiched between her shoulder and cheek, hands busy with laundry. She huffed as she lifted her load into the dryer, “and I’m going to talk some goddamn sense into that kid. There’s no way he’s pulling out of this slam because his...his *asshole* of a brother. There’s no way I’m letting that man ruin this for him. No way.”



There was the muffled sound of someone cursing on the other side of the phone, a sharp *George!*, and a swatting hand making contact with someone's arm. Dream sighed. "Puffy, I think...I think we have to wait him out on this one. He's obviously processing some shit, and I don't think us barging in there and yelling at him for pulling out is gonna be the best thing for him. I think we should just let him come to us."

"But he needs us, Dream!" She pressed, setting the basket of laundry down to clutch the phone in her hands. She tried to pretend that they weren't shaking, that she wasn't on the precipice of a break down. *Get it together!*, she wanted to scream at herself, *you're Captain! You're Momma Puffy—you have to be strong!* She grunted, slamming the dryer's door closed and putting her head in her hands. On the other side of the phone, Dream hummed in sympathy. "I can't leave him alone during this."

"He can handle it." Dream argued, but she could hear the fight puttering out from him in the way his voice cracked. He cleared his throat. "He's stronger than you think, Puffs, trust me. That kid will figure it out on his own."

Puffy paused, parsing Dream's words as she ran her tongue along her teeth; Dream may be a private man, but he wasn't that complicated once you figured him out. It didn't take a detective to see the similarities between the two poets, and she knew Dream saw it too. Dream knew it in the way he'd place an elbow on the boy's shoulder, cautious and uncharacteristically gentle, like he understood the boy would spook if he got too close; how he was simultaneously unafraid to push, to pick at the invisible scars that littered Tommy's words and entire self, always knowing what buttons to press to get the kid raw and vulnerable; Dream understood Tommy in a way that no one on the team could even hope to achieve, understood the pieces too close to fracturing and bruises hidden beneath metaphor and simile. They were one and the same.

So when Dream said 'that kid will figure it out on his own', what he was afraid to tell her was *he and I have both seen through to the end of worse; I have sat with his load alone before, and I have cried, but I have survived. If nothing else, Tommy will survive.* Even after all these years, nights spent holding together a body rattled with sobs and wiping away bloody noses and split lips, Dream would still forget there was more to life than just surviving. He had spent so long running, leaping from the rooftops of buildings he refused to call home, splitting oxygen into sharp gasps, that he forgot what it meant to *breathe*, deep and slow.

(And she didn't know if Tommy knew anything other than survival, than trying to stop your hands from shaking and keep your heart beating until the next day. If he did, then it had been long enough since he truly breathed that his lungs had all but withered away)

*One frequency*, she couldn't help but agree now, fingers massaging her temples where her baby-hairs frizzed, *two waves of energy crashing upon each other like waves breaking in the harbor.* And it was terrifying, it was watching a ship unable to dock as a storm brewed overhead, and she was afraid of what would happen when it would all sink. Her boys couldn't handle that—*she* couldn't handle that.

She straightened her spine, hand falling away from her face as she stared at the blank wall above her washing machine, lips twisting into a frown.

She took a deep breath. And then she released it.

“I’m not going to wait, because he can’t. He shouldn’t have to be alone,” she finally said, grip deadly around her phone, knuckles yellowing into white, “and neither should you. It’s okay to worry, you know? Because we’ll figure it out, we’ll talk to him, and we’ll *help*.”

Because even if Dream was in denial, even if he was still afraid of admitting that it was okay to expect more out of life, to want at all, she would be there to give him everything he wouldn’t ask for; even if he was still that sixteen year old sitting behind Kinoko’s trashcan one night with a bruised eye and unflinching glare, who stood, seventeen and bewitched at the sight of a poet speaking magic into a microphone, she would be there for him. She would be there as she always was, a Momma barely old enough to call herself grown and her Duckling—they against the world. She was his and he was hers, and now, Tommy was theirs.

And she would be damned if she let anything happen to her crew.

She blinked. “Hey, Dream, I think I’m going to have to call you back. I have to ask someone to do me a favor.

Dream made an inquisitive sound over the phone, trilling with poorly concealed anxiety. “Oh, okay, yeah for sure. That’s fine, I’ll just—who are you calling?”

Puffy turned from the blank wall, opening the door to her laundry room and entering the pleasant coolness of her empty kitchen. She inhaled the sharp air, shoulders lowering as she allowed her head to tilt back. “A friend; hey, do you know if Ponk is at her weekly date night?”

“Uh, they shouldn’t be—I think they were trying to rest before practice tomorrow? Why?” There was rustling on the other side of the phone, as if Dream was looking for something.

“Just hoping he wouldn’t be too mad at me when I steal his boyfriend for the night,” Puffy said, voice hushed with the beginning prickliness of adrenaline, already heading for her closet to grab a coat. She glanced down at her socked feet, pondering whether or not it was worth it to change out of PJs, “only one person knows Tommy’s address after all.”

“What are you planning Puffs?”

Puffy fought a small, hopeful smile threatening to turn her lips. Puffy was not an irrational person, but she was not a passive one either. If she was going to be the Captain of this team, if she truly was going to be the one at the helm in the face of every storm and almost-ship wreck, then she would take her own advice and *breathe*. She had to live for something, had to breathe for something, and this time, her breath would be dedicated to Tommy.

(And sure, maybe that little smile of her’s was just a bit devious, just a bit too sharp; what was a captain of a if not just as daring as her crew?)

“What are your thoughts on taking a late-night drive, Duckling?”

---

Ranboo forgot many things, but they couldn't forget the first time they saw Tommy cry.

They had moved from down from NorCal on the whim of their father post-divorce (a messy, complicated affair, with too many tears to count and yelling and rattling door frames—), and within a few months Ranboo's entire life, his friends, family, *everything* he had known, was seemingly plucked from the ground and transposed into a completely different world. Even though it was still California, SoCal was different in the not-so-subtle ways—how the sun shined relentlessly, searing the back of their neck, how the winds suddenly went sour and warm, roaring through the streets and turning over lawn-chairs and trashcans and sending the front door shuddering (and he wanted to hide, then, wanted to shout at their father and spit curses because how *dare* he move Ranboo from all they had known?), how there were seemingly rules to jay-walking—it was different in all the ways that mattered.

(Ranboo hated it, hated that they couldn't wear half of their sweaters until mid November, that their new high-school was just clusters of metal portables like shipping containers and a grass field, that they knew absolutely *no one*.)

So they forced themselves to plug in their ear-buds and close their eyes on car-rides to school, blocking out this new town with its cracked sidewalks and glaring sunlight and dry winds with the tumbling chords of their music. He tried to pretend the teething heat on his face the soft palms of his mother, brushing away stray eye-lashes in a wish for a good-day before she sent him off to kindergarten, and that the incessant squeaking of breaks as cars stopped on the freeway was the pitchy laughter of his aunt after dinner with too many glasses of wine. Yet, every time the car lulled to the stop and his father pulled to the curb, a soft, apologetic murmur of *we're here, bud*, every time he killed the engine, Ranboo was brought back to reality.

Mom was not here. Neither was his aunt. Here, all that remained were a few tin-can buildings and a lonely lunch table.

They didn't turn off their music as they got out the car.

Ranboo continued this way for probably the first four weeks until Tubbo had come crashing into their life. Tubbo, with his shaggy brown hair and penchant for foul language (that he would later learn was *nothing* compared to a certain blonde's potty mouth), who made zoo-animals and ninja-stars out of twisted paperclips, babbled about the rate of decay of different elements—Tubbo had seen them lurking outside the school cafeteria, made a quip about their Mario-Kart keychain, and had never looked back. Because of Tubbo, with his fire-bright eyes and even warmer smile, Ranboo had been able to begin to heal.

And it was nice, that first lunch. They had swapped stories and jokes alike, sprinkling tidbits of their past into mundane chatter as the lunch hour went by; Ranboo learned that Tubbo lived fourteen minutes from school with his mom and dad (*only children unite!*, he had cheered, face flushed with laughter), that he once taught himself to juggle because his father bet him he couldn't, and that he had dyslexia and used to go to speech therapy classes for a stutter.

"They honestly thought I was illiterate growing up," he'd shrugged, voice too casual to be indifferent, "they were convinced I couldn't read for like, four years of elementary school.

Fucked me up a bit, I guess.”

And Ranboo hadn’t known what to say to that, how to fathom a reasonable response to an insecurity being exposed so indelicately—so he didn’t say anything reasonable. In fact, what ended up tumbling out his mouth was: “my parents just got divorced because my aunt’s an alcoholic and I hate my dad.”

Tubbo had stared at him and silence.

Then: laughter.

“Oh my God,” Tubbo had breathed through his giggles, wiping at his eyes as they watered, “wh-what the fuck was that, man? Oh my God, that’s fucking—“

“I panicked!” Ranboo had squeaked, but his shoulders still shook with the laughter threatening to overtake them. “Listen, it was a very high stress environment—“

“Your aunt? What the fuck does that have to do with anything?”

“It’s complicated! Interpersonal relationships are very delicate things, and those outside our immediate sphere—“

“Nope, nuh-uh, big words. No thank you! Let’s go back to talking about why Wizards101 is the superior MMORPG.” And so they had, meaningless conversation pinging across the metal lunch table, words flying and hands gesticulating as they grew closer and closer with each joke flitting by, each burst of laughter and each exaggerated insult. Ranboo learned that Tubbo was a sharp-minded future-astronomer with an even sharper tongue; Tubbo learned that Ranboo was a Model UN kid that could talk themselves into circles and out of any argument. And so it was nice, this mutual exchange of poorly-timed laughter and half-finished sentences—it was *perfect*, and for once Ranboo thought they had gotten it all figured out.

And then Tommy had shown up.

Tommy: all braces and crooked smiles and explosive laughter, all dirty humor and sleeping in class and referrals to the principle’s office. When they first met at the lunch table, the teen’s chin propped on his hand as he methodically clicked a red-inked pen, blue eyes flashing like torrents surging across highways, Ranboo had thought Tommy could ruin them all if he wished.

(Sometimes, he still thought the boy could)

In the beginning, Tommy had hated Ranboo. This, Ranboo knew because of the sheer amount of times the blonde had said it during sophomore year—within the first week of being introduced to Tommy, the blonde had called them so many crude names that he had quickly ran out of vulgar words to insult the newest transfer to their school. Still, Ranboo hadn’t minded: regardless of Tubbo’s countless exasperated apologies upon Tommy’s behalf, Ranboo knew that it was only a matter of time before Tommy got bored and either decided to fuck-off or tolerate his presence. Ranboo wasn’t stupid—he knew kids like Tommy thrived

off of negative attention (which yeah, looking back was a dickish thing to think, but were they really wrong?), and being the non-confrontational person they were, Ranboo decided to just wait it out.

It would be fine; Ranboo was more than patient.

(Though there were nights where they sat alone in their father's new condo, wind beating against their window, chin on knees and eyes on unpacked moving boxes, wondering what they had done to deserve This. Why Tommy hated them, why Tubbo kept apologizing but said nothing during lunchtimes, why mom was gone—*not gone*, they tried to tell themselves, *just...away*—and why his One Good Thing had to be something he fought for)

And so began the most aggravating first semester of Ranboo's life. Tommy had done his best to scare Ranboo off—he spent lunch making rude comments about Ranboo's clothes and split-dye hair, and the class periods they shared were heavy with withering glares and subtle middle-fingers while the teacher's back was turned—but still Ranboo would not budge. He and Tubbo were friends, and no matter how jealous Tommy was of that fact, Ranboo would not back down. Because sure, he might hate confrontation, but he wasn't a coward—if this was to be a thing he'd have to fight for, he'd draw a line in the sand and keep his finger on the trigger.

So they steeled their spine, steadied their hands and voice; Ranboo was unflappable, was a river slowly carving into the stubborn earth of a hillside. Ranboo was not a coward, and so they would not allow Tommy to do what he did best and ruin.

But then there had to be That Morning. That goddamn morning during Spring semester when he had decided to stop in the bathroom on his way to the library for study hall; the morning when all the faucets of the bathrooms had been left on and water gurgled out of the drain's throat, flooded. At first, Ranboo had thought about just leaving whatever-the-fuck was going on to whichever poor soul came across the wrecked bathroom next, but as he wrinkled his nose and made for the exit, there was that sound, so small, so easily and painfully ignorable.

To this day, Ranboo wished they had never heard Tommy cry.

It was a pitiful sight to be honest—Tommy had been holed up on a toilet seat, knees dragged to his chest, eyes puffy with already-shed tears and chest heaving. He had his phone in his right hand and shirt bunched at the front in his left, looking for all the world like a kid trying to keep his heart from ripping itself out of his chest. *There's something wrong in me*, they remembered Tommy wheezing, eyes blown wide and lips parted as he struggled to breathe, *I-I can't...you need to help me, there's something wr-wrong in there*.

And Ranboo, stupid, horrified Ranboo—who still spent each night alone in an unfamiliar house and each school-day dodging taunt after taunt, who had just started therapy because their father said they 'needed help adjusting', who was beginning to forget his mother's perfume and aunt's favorite brand of liquor and whose therapist told him it was all just 'stress related', who was so afraid of forgetting his mother's face or her laugh or her hands on his cheeks—that Ranboo who had been hurting and in so many ways was still hurting, had taken one look at Tommy curled up on that toilet and said:

“Why should I?”

They don’t remember what happened after that, or during study hall or when they got home after class—it was all a blur of Tubbo’s anxious laughter at lunch, of dimmed-lights during lecture, of an empty seat at every table. He didn’t know when he got home or what he did or didn’t do, but he did remember That Morning and That Night which followed.

They had gotten a phone call at 4am from Tubbo, who was sobbing and asking Ranboo to go to Tommy’s house to *check, please, he’s not answering and I can’t lose him, please, just check. You’re the closest*. They don’t remember what they had said, but they do remember dashing out the door and forgetting to grab a sweater or their keys; they remember making the twelve minute walk to Tommy’s house in a seven minute run; they remember shouldering open an unlocked door into an empty house and running up stairs.

They remember music playing in one of the rooms, water seeping from under a bathroom door, and running faucets.

They do not remember what they saw. Their therapist says it’s a response to a traumatic or potentially disturbing event.

Ranboo doesn’t believe that. Not for a second.

Because even if Tommy had changed, was now all closed doors and fragile smiles and poorly-packed lunches, all insomnia-laced nights and missing photo albums and mothers who were *gone*, he was still Tommy. He was still that kid whose tongue grew thick with cursing until his sentences slurred into one another and Tubbo would laugh, was still that kid who was adamant that Jar Jar Binks was the best Star Wars character (even if Ranboo knew it was all a plot to get under Tubbo’s skin), who loved poetry and music and anything that could give itself life out of rhythm—*that was still Tommy*.

So no, nothing ‘bad’ happened That Night, at least, nothing the little trio couldn’t handle; Tommy was fine, and sure, Tubbo and Ranboo had to make sure he got home safe and texted him every morning and night, but it was *fine*. They had it under control, Ranboo didn’t need to regret anything or feel sorry for himself, and it was *fine*.

So why did it feel like the world was ending?

Because Tommy—brilliant, crude, endearingly obnoxious Tommy—hadn’t responded to either Tubbo or Ranboo’s goodnight or good morning texts in almost twenty hours, and had completely dodged their numerous phone calls. The three had planned to video call that night after Tommy’s slam (and the three would chat and pretend everything could be meaningless again, that nothing had ever really changed, not really, and Ranboo could stop feeling this *crushing* guilt that made them want to scream—), but Tommy was a no-show. This in itself wasn’t worrying, Tommy had missed enough late-night calls in the past due to his horrible sleep schedule that neither thought blinked an eye, but complete radio silence was new. Tommy *never* ignored good-morning texts—he always made a point to respond to each one, no matter how early Ranboo or Tubbo sent it, and he always sent back his very own special flavor of ‘fuck you, you’re my favorite people on Earth’ to go with it. And sure, sometimes he got distracted and wouldn’t text them back until four or five hours later (always with a

quick half-apology, always still scathing wit and awkward affection), but Tommy wasn't one to ignore his friends.

(Especially not after Tubbo had instilled a "Communicate or Get Fucked" policy regarding the friend group after Ranboo hid a family crisis from them a while back in junior year, claiming that *if you fuckers keep hiding when you're having a bad day for the sake of the rest of our's 'convenience', I'll punt you into the fucking sun*. Safe to say, they had a channel titled 'Mandatory Therapy' in their Discord server)

So yes, the world was ending, and Tubbo was currently sitting in the passenger seat of Ranboo's hand-me-down Honda Civic at 3am blasting reggeton. Ranboo didn't exactly know how they hadn't gotten pulled over yet, breaking every traffic law known to man and running red-lights, but the world was ending, so it didn't matter if he got a ticket now did it? Because Tubbo was anxiously humming along to a Bad Bunny song (*loud music helps me calm down*, Ranboo vaguely remembered him saying once during lunch, appraising a soggy peanut-butter sandwich, *it makes my mind go quiet*), and Ranboo couldn't care less about the flickering of lights in neighborhood windows as he woke the suburbs up. Because Tommy was at home, Tommy wasn't answering his phone, and Ranboo couldn't remember what happened That Night in sophomore year.

(Because all he could hear above the music was *Why should I?*)

"Did you text his brothers?" Ranboo asked, eyes flickering to the rearview to see an empty road—no one was on the streets this late. "Did you text Will—"

"—yes, yes, and he didn't answer, so I found Techno's insta profile and DMed him there, and then he didn't answer because apparently no one in the Watson house-hold can answer a goddamn phone—"

"What about Phil? Did you try Phil?"

"We both know Phil wouldn't pick up anyway, he's basically nonexistent." Tubbo was fiddling with the dial now, switching from Bad Bunny to whatever Screamo music they had playing on the other station. "I mean, I've known Tommy for four years and I haven't even met the guy."

"Couldn't hurt to try," Ranboo said, but knew it was a losing argument anyway: Phil was an extraneous variable in this equation, and right now the priority was on getting to Tommy's house without an accident and figuring out what the fuck was going on. They sighed, "God, we can't just show up without an explanation, what are we going to tell them?"

"Does it matter?" Tubbo mumbled, eyes pinned on the street-lights streaming past as they drove. "Doesn't matter what we tell them, we just need to make sure Tommy's okay. They didn't care then, and they don't care now."

Ranboo bit his lip, fingers gripping the steering wheel as he allowed Tubbo's statement to settle in the silence between them, the only noise the sound of Skrillex and rubber wheels on tarmac. Then: "you know it's not your fault right?"

Tubbo snorted, a harsh, unforgiving thing, “bullshit. I told him to try to connect with his family and he got hurt. I—I told him to give them a chance, and they-they *ruined* him. I...”

Ranboo eased the steering wheel in a turn, eyes unflinching from where they gazed at the road in front of them. Truthfully, there was no right answer here. Sure, there were many things he could say, many things that would be uttered, meaningless and empty, only to swallowed by the music blasting out the radio. There wasn’t anything to say to make this go away, no quick words to plaster over the quiet like a bandage, no fast-talking that could get him out of This—for once, Ranboo was speechless.

They felt like a coward.

*(There’s something wrong in me...)*

He gripped the wheel tighter. Next to him, Tubbo’s forehead lulled against the window.

*(you need to help me)*

But still, he would try.

“Tommy isn’t ruined. They didn’t—he’s fine. Okay? He’ll be fine. He always is.” And he knew it sounded desperate to his own ears, knew that it was a flimsy attempt at confidence, but he couldn’t give up this easy. “And even—even if it’s not fine, which it won’t be, we’ll figure it out. We’ve got this. There’s nothing the three of us can’t handle, right?”

Tubbo didn’t speak, eyes never leaving the windowpane and world that raced alongside them, a river threatening to give chase. Just as Ranboo thought the boy had finally resigned himself to silence, to the false words of comfort echoing over the glove-compartment between them, Tubbo whispered, “what if it isn’t us three?”

Ranboo wished he could close his eyes, wished he could pretend the end of the world was soft. That it was just matter falling away into nothing, just something easy, like resting your head on a pillow and warm hands tracing your smile lines. He wished he could close his eyes and pretend this was just a story to be read and tucked away to collect dust, that he would wake up in an old childhood bedroom in San Francisco and hear the *clink* of wine glass stems being handled just a bit too roughly and a woman’s laugh. He wished he could forget this.

*(Why should I?)*

But their eyes were open, and a familiar house with a faintly lit porch was looming in the distance.

*This is still Tommy, they thought, mouth gone dry with a sudden realization, all of this, it’s still Tommy. Always was. And as long as that’s true, I’ll do everything I can to help him. Whatever it takes.*

“It will always be us three,” they said, and for the first time since they had stumbled upon a blonde boy sobbing in a toilet-stall, they truly felt brave, “and as long as that’s true, we can do *anything*.”



This time, Ranboo would remember.

## Chapter End Notes

phewwwwww.

do i hate this chapter? yes. did i write it at midnight in a dark dorm room post five hours of straight studying? also yes. are there typos? absolutely.

Either way, hope you enjoyed! If you're here for the zeeskeit life update, here's what's happened since the last month and a half I've seen you guys:

- moved into college (aka uni) across the country; i now am taking 5 classes and have over 40 hours of reading a week! but seriously, i really love my classes
- i have a presentation in the morning im nervous about!
- gender crisis! again!
- started working on a school film :D i am actually scouting locations this weekend
- made a friend into dsmp so that's dope
- found out i have ~trauma~ (that was a doozy) and had a paper due immediately after
- considered switching my majors 5 times a day
- read some very very nice comments y'all are so nice please i cant and for what /pos

There's much more, including communal-bathroom shenanigans that include someone eating a sandwich while I was trying to shower, but that's it! Thank you guys so much for all your well wishes and poetry recommendations, it was def nice to have something to read while I sat alone during orientation because I couldn't find any of my buildings for my activities! /lh

See y'all soon!

# **“This is an ancient practice: predicting the future/in another’s prone body”**

## Chapter Notes

Title from “Haruspex” by Teresa Pham-Carsillo

UH HI GUYS! IT'S BEEN A WHILE HASN'T IT?

first of all, thank you so much for all the kind and encouraging words you guys have gifted me throughout the process of writing this chapter! it's been a bit of a whirlwind month and a half, and it meant a lot to be able to see you guys connect over poetry and just,,be so wonderfully nice and gentle with me. thank you, really /gen

Now for what you've all been waiting for! Chapter 9 whoo!

CWs: Mentioned/referenced death of parent, implied sexual activities (very very vague and not anything weird tho dw, it's about discovering your sexuality), coming out, internalized ace-phobia, going non-verbal, implied/referenced suicide attempt, implied/referenced drinking, hyperbolic threats, implied/referenced child neglect, and lots LOTS of cursing.

Phew, hope I got it all! please make sure to stay safe - we are in the thick of it now!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Something had gone wrong.

Techno prided himself on being observant, able to unwind the motivations behind even the most mundane of actions, but it didn’t take a genius to see that Wilbur’s plan had gone bad. Before their mysterious ‘outing’ (*a late night drive to the coffee shop, nothing more, nothing else*, Tommy had apparently told Wilbur, to which Wilbur immediately told his twin that *Tommy is definitely hiding something important*. Techno thought this obvious), Wilbur had prattled on for hours about his hopes to begin “Project Reconnect With Tommy” in full. In theory it was simple: Wilbur would drive Tommy to his secret get-together with a few friends, learn more about whatever Tommy was keeping from the family, and rekindle the old bond between the two brothers via friendly banter and a late-night drive. Easy as cake.

In practice, it was a shit-show waiting to happen.

Techno wasn’t being melodramatic when he described Tommy as a ‘tempest’: the kid was moody at best, a hurricane waiting to devour at worst. He was quiet and snappish, proverbial-hackles raised and eyes darting to and fro as if waiting for someone to attack—for all intents and purposes, his brother was a wild thing waiting to bite.

*Wild Thing*, he couldn't help but muse now, willfully ignoring a bedroom door that remained shut tight more than it opened, *that always had been Tommy's favorite*. The boy would beg Wilbur to read it to him before bedtime, and though his twin bemoaned in private how much he hated the picture book (*I've got it completely memorized Tech! Memorized!*), Techno knew that Wilbur loved the way their younger brother's eyes gleamed as he stared at the looming figures of fur and sharp teeth, how the blonde toddler would clap and babble, pointing at the boy with a gold crown and fur pajamas and flash that toothless grin. Wild Thing: grubby fingers leaving prints all on Mom's fine silverware, the shriek of laughter when the bath bubbles flew and Dad sighed, bright smiles and baby-chatter overshadowing Wilbur's attempts at learning a new song, small hands tugging at Techno's braid—Wild Thing indeed.

(And when you caged up a Wild Thing, you better be prepared to hear it roar.)

So yes, Techno knew something had gone wrong when Wilbur stormed through their living room with a scowl on his face, glasses askew on his pointed nose as Tommy followed, blank and docile. Wilbur had spat something about needing a cigarette, Techno had made a sly comment about lung cancer, and Tommy had remained uncharacteristically quiet. Of course Techno had noticed his younger brother's silence (he was a researcher after all, it was his job to see the details that hid themselves in plain sight), but he didn't think too much of it. Obviously, Wilbur's plan had gone astray, and Techno would be left to deal with the fall out. This in itself wasn't too worrying—Techno had made a habit of cleaning up after his twin's messes, piecing back together the fragile walls of this glass house he was intent on destroying—and Techno had prepared himself for bed without so much as an exasperated sigh and weary trip up the stairs. He had put on his pjs, brushed his teeth, set aside his glasses, and knocked on his twin's door.

It took only a blink for Wilbur to throw open the door and drag Techno inside.

(They were magnets, it might be easiest to explain, magnets that were polar opposites and so forever drawn together. They were Wilbur Soot and Technoblade, the former born twenty-two minutes before the latter. Two boys with funny names who became men too quickly; two men who didn't grow out of the childhood grief they had been raised in)

"I don't understand," Wilbur said, rough heels of his palms pressing into his eyes, teeth gnawing at bottom lip as he groaned in frustration, "nothing's making...he's not making sense! He's acting like-like dad was abusive and *horrible* to him and just...he said that in front of *everyone*, Tech! He aired out our whole family's dirty laundry like it was a bloody reality TV show! In front of Dream! And oh, *Dream*, don't get me started! I could kill that fucking—"

"Okay, okay, calm down before you pull a total Hamlet." Techno huffed, fiddling with the end of his braid as he sat cross-legged on his brother's down-comforter. He tried to quell the rising anxiety in his gut—right now, his priority was figuring out what exactly had happened at this 'open-mic' that Wilbur supposedly taken Tommy to (supposedly, even more unbelievable, so Tommy could *perform a poem*), and go from there. "So let me get this straight: Dream coerced our brother into performing a tell-all about Dad being sucky and you being a bitch? And Tommy *wrote* the thing?"

“Wow, a man of delicate words. And it’s *us* ‘being a bitch’, not just me,” Wilbur’s voice bordered on venomous, but he begrudgingly took his place at Techno’s side, sighing as he rested his forehead on his twin’s shoulder, “but yeah. Apparently Tommy is a performance poet who writes with my community-college arch-rival nemesis, and they both make shouty poems about their dads. And we knew absolutely nothing about it.”

Techno breathed heavily through his nose, tilting his head to lay upon the crown of his brother’s. He knew objectively that Wilbur was taking this unreasonably hard, that he was just reacting badly to Tommy’s anger and the shit-show that came with seeing Dream, but still he felt the pinpricks of dread upon the back of his neck, sending his hair standing. Wilbur was dramatic, of course he was, but he wasn’t completely irrational—what about the poem shook him so badly? Made him so angry?

(*He’s scared*, something in him whispered, solemn and too-knowing, *something about Tommy scared him. Something’s very, very wrong.*)

(He tried his best to ignore that voice. He had to)

“Well...what did he say?”

If Techno imagined hard enough, he could hear the rustle of the cogs in Wilbur’s brain from where his ear pressed against the musician’s skull, clicking like teeth as the gears ran smoothly against each other—his brother had always been smart. Sure, Technoblade might be the one with a 4.0 GPA and on a full-ride scholarship, but if anyone asked he’d easily say that Wilbur was the genius out of the two of them. Wilbur was more than just smart: he was cutting, as self-assured and knowing as a predator circling prey. Wilbur was not analytical, was not objective like Techno was, but he was intelligent and cynical and *dangerous* (and Techno knew his twin hated that word, hated how it loomed over his every action, residue from nights smuggling cigarettes and smashed bottles under his bed, how it made him something to be feared), and he knew how to bend the truth to his will.

(And Techno knew that right now his brother was weighing the benefits between telling him what had actually happened and wrapping up his words into delicate half-truths)

Wilbur let out an exhale, his entire body shuddering as if he was a faulty machine not built to breathe, each inflation of his lungs an accident. *We have been here before*, Techno mused, hand pressing against the warm back of Wilbur’s neck, steady and unrelenting, *this is what we always return to: bad breathing and twin brothers. My professor would call this motif overdone.*

And yet, the roles had been reversed, hadn’t they? Because for all the messes Wilbur made and all the shattered glass Techno swept away, it was still always Wilbur who had been born just twenty minutes before—it was still Wilbur who got his license first and drove Techno to practice when Dad was too tired, it was Wilbur who learned to cook chili because it was Techno’s favorite, and it was Wilbur who had been *there* for him even across oceans.

(And it had been Wilbur, just Wilbur, who stayed on the line with Techno at 1:00am BST the night of his first kiss and what had come after, humming quietly as the younger sobbed into his phone, asking *why didn’t I like it? I’m supposed to—why can’t I get my brain to work*

*right, why am I made wrong?* Who had told him to breathe, counting each reckless inhale with an uncharacteristic patience, voice as gentle as morning rain on windowsills and hands in his hair.

(*You're not made wrong*, his brother had said firmly, and Techno had squeezed his eyes shut, hoping against all odds that if he imagined hard enough there would be calloused fingers against his, perfectly shaped to match his handprint and hold, *there's nothing wrong with you. Your brain is just fine; you're Technoblade, you're made just perfectly, and you're my brother.* And quietly, as if the reverberation of his voice through the staccato of the telephone speaker would shatter him, Wilbur had *explained*, had given Techno new words to tie to himself, new ways to give this feeling he'd been stowing away a name. And just like that, Wilbur had done what he'd always done—he had been a big brother)

They were magnets, sure, opposites, maybe—but they were *twins*, two halves of the same fracturing whole, and at the end of the day Wilbur would always be Techno's.

So Techno would clean his messes, would shoulder his burdens, anything that could even come close to paying back Wilbur for what he had given him. He would do anything for Wilbur, just as he knew Wilbur would do anything for him. No matter what storm wreaked havoc or what Wild Thing got loose.

“He said many things.” His twin finally settled on, screwing up his lips as if swishing the words on his tongue, tasting them for truth (or whatever was closest). There was a pause, where Techno thought that he would be left once more in the dark and forced to extrapolate based off of the minimal information given, but Wilbur's throat trilled something uncertain and too sincere, and suddenly his was speaking again. “About Dad and us going away, and—and drinking. *Him* drinking. And about...*Mom*, there-there was a line, fuck, it—“

“Wilbur,” Techno interrupted gently, feeling the twine holding his brother together begin to snap, “it's ok, you don't have to—“

“There's a mother underground somewhere...” Wilbur said, and Techno thought that a lightbulb might have burst, because suddenly his ears were ringing and it was too dark, and he couldn't see Wilbur's expression but could feel the way the musician's hands trembled in his, “...with—with a missing face. With your smile. Your father claims he *doesn't remember her*.”

That. That didn't—Techno didn't know what to do with that. There was no logic in that statement: of course Phil remembered their mother, *of course Dad*...what did Tommy mean? Kristin was their mother, she was still a part of the family, there was no way Dad would've—

“Tech,” Wilbur was saying, but Techno couldn't hear him over the chorus of blood rushing in his ears, singing like a tragedy—this didn't make sense. It wasn't logical, *Tommy* wasn't being logical. “Techno—”

*‘A mother...with a missing face’*

Did he mean metaphorically? If he was a poet (and oh, how that made his head spin. His little brother, annoying little Tommy, *Wild Thing*, a poet?) it must have been figurative. *Ah*, Techno

tried to breathe, hands curling tighter from where they grasped Wilbur, *that must be it. He's just welding words together; he's just playing pretend.* Of course. There was a reasonable explanation to his brother's melodrama, there always was.

"Techno." Wilbur started, eyes unblinking as he gazed at a wall scattered with posters of rock-bands and favorite movies and all the unimportant things that come with being a teenager. Dimly, Techno realized they were quite too old for that now. "Techno...there used to be—before we left. There was—why aren't there...why aren't there any photos of Mom in the house?"

And oh.

*Oh.*

Technoblade once took a class during his undergrad about Early Modern English literature; it was a boring course, for all intents and purposes (Technoblade much preferred studying the Classics, admiring the undaunted, indisputable aspect of something well preserved), but there was a lecture on figurative language that he had admittedly enjoyed. He had never been one for dressed-up metaphor, opting to examine theme through characterization and plot devices, and the study of the Imagists confirmed this belief: '*Go in fear of abstractions*', Ezra Pound had said, all high-collared and preening, '*...use either no ornament or good ornament.*'

Techno had taken this to heart—he was not a man of abstraction. He believed in solely the empirical, even within something as ambiguous as literature, and that everything could be condensed into its core attributes to be systematically categorized. He did not believe in the superfluous, did not believe in 'ornaments', and so he did not understand his brother. It would be inaccurate to describe Tommy as an enigma, he realized, because that would imply there was a method to be understood. To a puzzle there must be a solution, and there was no answer to his little brother's behavior. And yet...

Techno was observant, but right now he felt particularly dense.

Because Wilbur was right: there were no pictures of their mother in the house. Where had once hung family portraits, well loved snapshots of a dark haired woman always with a moon crescent smile and a child or two propped on her hip (and oh, how he missed that, the feeling of his mother's arms around his torso, holding him as if he was made of fine crystal, fragile, precious), now there was nothing. *And I didn't even notice*, the thought had his stomach rolling, and he pressed his lips into a thin line, bone-white from pressure, *I didn't even see that she was missing. Has she been missing this whole time? Oh, God, what if Tommy hasn't seen her since—*

His stomach lurched. Wilbur gripped his hand tighter.

*Eight years*, Techno's eye twitched, and he tried to ignore the pounding headache beginning to form, *we've been gone since he was ten. He hasn't seen her face in almost eight years.* There's no way he could have remembered her, no way his brain would have been able to absorb the face of the woman who had brought him into this world—who had brought him in alone, screaming and thick with blood, who had *left them*—no way he would have been able to see that Wilbur had her eyes and Techno her frown, that Tommy carried her laughter in the

way his eyes scrunched before he threw his head back to guffaw. None of that, none of the small pinprick details that could be sewed together to create the perfect picture of Mom...his little brother had nothing.

His mother was dead. And his little brother didn't know what she looked like.

(*'...it is a manner of speech among poets...'* Pound had continued, glib and cynical, so easy to brush aside, *'...to chant of dead, half forgotten things, there seems no special harm in it, it has always been done'* And Techno hadn't known what that meant. He thought he did now.)

There is a silence that comes with death. Techno thought people didn't really talk about that enough—there is a quiet that follows after you've lost something, after the screaming and sobs of father's clutching to mother corpses, after your brother's night terrors and panic attacks and the baby that won't stop crying, there is vacuum of sound opens up its mouth and begins to eat. After Mom died Technoblade went nonverbal for months; there were still times where his voice would simply just disappear, where he was that little boy again, who stood by his mother's plastic hospital bed and watched as his father smooth her hair out from where it was pressed to her sweaty forehead, blubbing prayer after prayer. There were days where he couldn't speak, couldn't force words out his mouth, and was left to live in silence. He had learned to accept it.

(And maybe that's he couldn't understand Tommy, not really—he didn't understand how someone could be so loud in the face of grief. He didn't understand how this Wild Thing dared to raise his voice, to shriek with joy and anger and pain and *life*)

But now, as he sat in a dimly lit room with his brother's hands in his, Wilbur's forehead pressing into the crook between his shoulder and neck as if to hide away, he couldn't help but hate the silence. *It's ruining us*, he bit his lip, *it's suffocating us*.

Because this...this wasn't working. He didn't know what to fix. There was something wrong in the house, more than he had initially hypothesized; this was more than just slipping late night apologies under doors on his twin's behalf or mincing goodbyes before each fencing tournament—this was *wrong*.

“Techno, something—something's up with Tommy.” Wilbur said now, voice muffled from where he was tucked away into his brother's side. A weary hand slipped out of Techno's to fall gently on his head, patting it once, twice. “I don't like it. The things he said...we need to talk to him, need to set him straight. It doesn't feel right.”

*And Dad*, the realization went unspoken, though both brothers could hear it in the way their hearts trilled against their ribcages in anxiety, *we need to talk to Dad, he messed up, and we need to figure out how he's going to fix it*.

*But how?* Techno wanted to cry. He wanted to hit something, let his knuckles go raw with the impact of his fist against drywall—instead, he a hand through his brother's untamed curls.

“Go to bed, Will.” He finally said, voice heavy with exhaustion, fingers stalling where they twisted around his twin's frizzy hair, dry and tangled from a lack of care. He winced as he snagged on a knot. “We'll talk to Tommy in the morning, ok? It'll be fine then.”

Wilbur hummed, voice lilting, unconvinced, but he did not speak. And so they sat, measured by their motifs: two brothers in a childhood bedroom with the lights off, afraid of glass houses but left with nothing but stones and bad breathing. Quiet.

Thirty minutes later a hurried knock sounded on the front door. Neither boy rose to answer it.

Fifteen minutes after, Techno was woken up by a roar.

Wild Things indeed.

---

*I am not afraid of a door.*

This, Tubbo chanted with his fist poised to strike once more upon the hardwood of the Watson family's front door. *I am not. This is fine. There's nothing to be afraid of, it's fine.* Steeling his nerves, teeth clenched as anxiety bubbled in his chest, Tubbo brought his knuckles down to knock. It was a harsh, panicked sound, that echoed in the empty streets; they had been in front of the house for all of five minutes, the early-morning air biting at the their skin, chewing until it was pink and raw, as they hollered at the white-painted door to swing open. The two alternated between pounding mercilessly on its surface and jamming the doorbell, taking turns pleading to the darkened windows to flicker with life.

*If he doesn't come out of this house in four seconds,* Tubbo had said when they first arrived, eyes narrowed and rough-edged flint, *I'm going to fucking SWAT his ass.* And the threat had been light-hearted, all bundled up in nerves and dry humor, but as the minutes brushed past and their calls went unanswered, Tubbo had grown desperate. Tubbo was far from irrational: he dealt in pragmatics, in quick reasoning followed by sound deduction and hypothesis, and he knew that logically his friend was in one of his 'funks'. It was a nasty habit the whole group had tried to work on together, resulting in Tubbo throwing together a powerpoint presentation with way too many aggressive slides about 'communication being key to fostering strong, meaningful bonds that mean I won't kick your ass when you ghost me', but it was still a reoccurring problem Tubbo found himself facing time and time again.

(If he were any kind of poet, he'd describe his best friend as a wounded wolf—Tommy liked to lick his wounds in private, only showing his hide after the danger had passed and he could flaunt his new scars—and himself the bedraggled trapper trying to lull the beast in. There was only so much sweet words and reassurances could accomplish; Tommy would have to come to him)

But something felt different this time. It was in the way the street echoed with their shouts, how the porch-light cast shadows across the wooden boards and distorted the figures they left behind, Tubbo too long and Ranboo too thin; it was in the way Tubbo's phone rung silent, nothing but dial-tone and unanswered lines. That flint inside him, that thing dagger-sharp and waiting to be struck, burst into flames: his best friend wasn't answering.

Tommy always answered Tubbo. Maybe not Ranboo, maybe not Wilbur or even Mr. Sam, but he *always* answered Tubbo. The only time he hadn't...

Tubbo didn't like this. It felt different—it felt familiar.



(It was then he remembered he was no poet. He was a scientist. He didn't know how to hide behind his words, so here was the truth: the system was crashing)

"Please, please open up," he hissed, voice rising to a high-pitched shout as the house remained cruelly dim, "Tommy! Wilbur! Anyone, fucking hell just—*open up!* You goddamn fucking shirts—"

"Dude," Ranboo scolded, though from the way their hands shook as they tapped away at their phone, the attempt was half-hearted. Ranboo hadn't said much to Tubbo after they had stepped out the car, anxiously dialing Tommy's phone number over and over as the two shouted at empty windows. Still, Tubbo could practically thoughts the words buzzing around his friends skull, the countless words struggling to make their way out their mouth; Ranboo was not one to be speechless, and yet, all the teen could do was fiddle with his phone and echo what fell from Tubbo's lips. The younger sighed, placing a timid hand on Tubbo's shoulder, "it's—stop it, they're not going to open up if they hear some-some hooligan screaming at the top of his—"

Tubbo shook the hand off with a harsh jerk, briefly sending a scathing glare to the teenager looming behind him. "Well they're going to fucking have to open up! Tommy! Get your ass out here! I swear to God—"

"Tubbo..."

"—I will fucking burn your house to the ground asshole!"

"*Tubbo!*" Ranboo's hand fount itself on his shoulder again, and they gently tugged the younger teen from the door. Tubbo grit his teeth, blinking away the pressure building behind his eyelids. "Please, just...you need to calm down. We have to be—we can't go into this with a bad headspace, dude."

"*Fuck this shit!*" Tubbo let out a strangled roar of frustration, chest so tight he thought his ribs might snap and give away; all that fury, the burning inside him and that teeth-grinding *terror* that was threatening to overtake him, it all spilled out as he screamed at the Watson's unlit house. It wasn't *fair*—why did Tommy have to push him away? Why did his family, his stupid, fuck-up of a family, have to come back just to torture his friend? Just to show him they didn't care? It wasn't fair!

*I am so tired of trying to stop a car crash that's already in motion.* Tubbo wanted to cry, hands balled into fists from where he stood, breath leaving him in quivering puff that hung in the early-dawn mist. *It's not fair. I am so tired of waiting for Tommy to leave me.*

Because that's what this was, wasn't it? Tommy was going to leave him because his family was unable to see what they had done, the damage they had wrought on his friend who had only been a child. Unable to see what they *didn't* do.

(And Tubbo still thought of the morning after That Night, when Tommy had laid on his living room couch, eyes swollen from tears that had long-since stopped coming and pupils dilated as he stared at a blank ceiling. *I don't think I ever grew up*, Tommy said, voice so quiet in the darkness of Tubbo's house, hushed even as Tubbo gripped his hand so tight it would bruise,

*not really. I never got time to. I think...I think that when my mom died, I did too.* And Tubbo thought he would accidentally shatter the boy's fingers)

Because Tubbo had failed that child, hadn't given him enough reasons to stay. Tubbo knew that it was irrational, knew that there were some things you couldn't fix, some things he couldn't rationalize and hypothesize and create a precise methodology to *perfect*, but he still felt that guilt that had squeezed him almost-dead ever since That Night. He knew it was stupid—he was just a kid too, he shouldn't be carrying this around, trying to hold together the pieces of his friend hell-bent on shattering, *he was just a kid*—but it didn't make it hurt any less.

It didn't make him hate himself any less.

"I lost him." He found the words escaping him before he could think. Tubbo's legs grew weak, and he swallowed the bile threatening to rise. *Oh God*. He sat down heavy, ignoring Ranboo's panicked hands fluttering nearby as he curled up on the top step of Tommy's porch. He squeezed his eyes shut. *Oh God, oh God*, he was going to puke, "oh God. I—Ran, we need to...there has to be a way, he can't just—Ranboo, *I can't lose him*."

Ranboo shot forward, fingers clawing in the back of Tubbo's sweatshirt as they wrapped their long arms around Tubbo's torso, fabric bunching under their hold. Tubbo began to shake; Ranboo had only held him like this once before, when Tubbo thought his joints would pop out of their sockets from how hard his sobs rattled in his chest, when Ranboo couldn't remember the date or why the sight of running water made them forget their own name. They had both only been this broken once before, when a blonde boy laid on a beat-up living room couch and told them he wished he had died in that bathroom.

"I can't lose him, I can't, I can't, I—"

"You won't. I promise." The clawed hands clinging to his back sunk folder into the folds of his sweatshirt, and Tubbo let out a wet sob. He pretended it sounded like a laugh. "You won't, we won't. Because we're going to go in there and find Tommy okay. We're going to march right up those stairs and throw open his door, and we'll lecture him to hell and back for worrying us. And it will be fine, because we're *us*. We're Tommy, Tubbo, and Ranboo..."

Ranboo pulled away, and suddenly Tubbo's heart seemed to seize; there, under a flickering porch light that cast yellowed-shades upon cheekbones and distorted shadows, Ranboo's eyes *gleamed*. They were alight, full of fire and anger and desperation and terror and *hope*, so much hope that Tubbo thought he'd set the earth ablaze with it, that all it would take is a blink and sparks would fly from his friend's gaze. Ranboo smiled, half-crooked and too grim, and said: "...because we could *ruin* the world together."

Tubbo gasped, breathless, and opened his mouth to speak.

A door slammed open, orange light spilling from the entry way upon their prone forms.

"What the fuck are you doing outside our house?"

And Tubbo believed them; together, they burned.

---

Wilbur had woken up to many things in his life—alarm clocks, crying children, theater majors with too much time on their hands, fire alarms, roommates having a row, crying fathers—but very rarely, if ever, had he woken up to two random teenagers verbally harassing his brother in the living room.

At 3:30am in the morning no less. Absolutely great for his beauty sleep.

Not that Wilbur had been doing much resting; the night had been one of kicked-off comforters and legs twisted in sheets, of bleary eyes opening to a pitch-black room with a blank ceiling. Briefly in the night he had been woken up by the shuddering of a door in its frame as it was pushed ajar, of a window opening and closing, but he was too exhausted from the day's shitty events to properly rise from his mattress, and so he tumbled back into the too-warm arms of sleep. He did not dream, and for that he was thankful.

But, as he stood in the dimmed living room of his childhood home, gazing at his twin brother being chewed out by a duo of comically feral teens, he thought he must've been dreaming. Or having a nightmare.

Techno had his palms facing the two seething teenagers in the universal sign of surrender (one that Wilbur found laughable on his brother's imposing frame; it was no small feat to make fencing champion 'The Blade' nervous, and boy was it hilarious to watch), and the grad student looked dead on his feet. Dark purple half-moons decorated Techno's haggard face right below his eyes, looking far from waning as he tried to reel the kids frothing at the mouth in front of him. Wilbur's brother sighed, "look, I don't know who you are but you need to leave—"

"We told you! You bubblegum-headed bitch! Let us upstairs or I swear to all things holy that I will make your life a living hell!" The shorter of the two, brown haired with a bad case of bed-head and wrinkled pajama bottoms, was practically spitting like an angry cat. The boy jabbed a finger at Techno's chest, who did nothing more than grimace as the boy glared up at him with eyes puffy and lids flushed pink from what could only be tears. "Don't test me! I have a blue belt in taekwando and I will bust your ass!"

*Yep, definitely a nightmare.*

There was a deep groan, and Wilbur's attention was drawn to the other teenager leaning against the back of the sofa, head in their hands as they seemingly let out a slew of weary curses. They were tall (much taller than Wilbur himself, practically towering over him, he noted with a pinprick of irritation), and much better composed than their counterpart—clothed in jeans and a sensible t-shirt and jacket, they apparently had the foresight to attempt at smoothing their hair into something resembling neat. *Though, conditioner is a must.* Wilbur noted, seeing the teen fiddle with the dry strands as they tried to chastise Short-Stacks into calming down. From the way the boy was still seething, it would take a while.

Wilbur blinked, rubbing at his eyes. *What the ever living fuck did I walk into?*

"Kid, I could throw you like a sack of potatoes."

“Say that again! One more time! I dare you Pinky—“

“We don’t have time for this!” The taller one suddenly shouted, voice shrill and bubbling with frustration. They pushed themselves off the back of the couch, huffing as they placed a slender hand on Short-Stacks’ shoulder, pulling the teenager away from where he was squaring up with Technoblade. “Listen, Tubbo and I just want to check to make sure Tommy’s okay. And we can’t do that because *you’re in our way*, so please, let us through and —“

“What the fuck do you want with Tommy?” Wilbur found himself blurting, wincing as the taller teen’s mouth clicked shut and everyone swiveled their head to pin him with their gaze. Shivers crawled up Wilbur’s spine, and self-consciously he rubbed at the goosebumps appearing on his arm. “Who even are you guys?”

(He tried to ignore how they looked at him, how Techno’s eyes widened in that tell-tale sign of pity; how the two teenagers glowered at him as though he had done something wrong)

Techno heaved another great sigh, pinching the bridge of his nose. When he spoke, his voice sounded as though someone had thrown gravel in a laundry machine just to watch it cyclone. “Wilbur, meet local delinquents Ranboo and Tubbo; they’re apparently here to crash Tommy’s pity party up there.”

“We’re Tommy’s friends,” the short one, Tubbo, corrected, dark eyes flickering something indiscernible. Tubbo swept his gaze over Wilbur’s form, then Techno’s, before that flickering settled into something akin to kindling, flames gentle and whispering in the silk-thread smoke. He twisted his lips into a bitter smile, too little teeth, “his *family*. And we need to help him. So please, if you care about your little brother at all, you’ll let us up those stairs.”

If asked, Wilbur would lie and say his first reaction had been one of anger, one of indignation and spitfire words. *How dare you*, he would say, eyebrows pitched forwards in a scowl and lips pulling away to reveal teeth, *how dare you insinuate I do not care for my little brother?* Because Wilbur was a big brother, *Tommy’s* big brother, and any implication otherwise was ludicrous; *of course I care*, he wanted to scream, *of course I care for Tommy. Why would you ever say otherwise?*

But truthfully, as he stood barefoot in his childhood home’s living room with straining lightbulbs and two strangers who proclaimed themselves ‘family’, his first reaction had been quiet, soft. Maybe it was because he was still trying to wake up, maybe it was because he was exhausted and tired of being angry, or maybe it was just because he was so tired of *feeling*, but he didn’t do much more than blink and whisper a dumbstruck “oh.”

*Oh.*

(He thought of muffled mutterings and late night calls blocked by a scuffed wooden door; he thought of paper-streamers and twitching fingers adjusting a mic-stand. He thought of empty bottles, rusted hinges, and spotless bathroom tiles. He thought of a hallway with missing photos, white splotches where the family portraits had once hung, shielding the beige walls from dust—it felt like a plot of land one may section for burial. It felt like an un-opened grave)

(He thought of a boy, the wide eyes he hadn't grown into yet, blue and unrelenting as they stared at the shuddering pixels on a Gameboy screen. He thought of yelling)

*I care.* And he did not shout it, did not puff his chest and square his shoulders. Instead, he felt himself shrinking. *I care. You could never know how much.* He really did, so much that sometimes he thought all he could do is fall to his knees, to open his hands, palm-upward and pleading—how could he not? He was a big brother, he was supposed to be the un-trembling foundation of which his brothers would build upon, he was supposed to be self-assured and rational and *care*.

He was supposed to be the one to teach Techno how to shave, Tommy how to drive; he was meant to be the strong one, the protector. He had known that since he was eight years old, with a missing front-tooth and a dead mother and a missing father. He had always known it would be him filling the roles left empty, folding laundry and cooking dinner and teaching his little brother the ABCs; Techno could go to his tournaments, Tommy could play his little video games, and Wilbur would remain where he was. He would *stay*.

And it had been unfair, so, so *unfair*. He had wanted a normal childhood, to go home to loving parents like Eret and Niki and Fundy, wanted to be tucked into bed at night and only worry about schoolwork and the newest Call of Duty being released. He had wanted to be normal; he wanted to be able to be free, to leave. So he did.

Looking at these two teenagers, eyes round and mournful and so afraid, afraid for his little brother, he wanted to say he regretted it.

(He wasn't sure if he could)

Because something was seriously wrong; as he had laid in bed that night, waiting for sleep to kiss his brow bone and relieve him from the storm brewing in his head, he could only think of his brother's expression. How his face had crumpled as Wilbur had yelled at him in the car, a small grimace etching itself frown lines on his cheeks, eyebrows shadowing those eyes that had shined with That Look. That look that he had seen cross his baby brother's face so many times—over dinner tables and after shouting matches, when Wilbur had left him with nothing but locked doors and sharp words—That Look that had Wilbur at therapy appointments once a week, that made him bury his head in his pillow at night. Wilbur was no idiot, he wasn't blind: he knew he had hurt Tommy's feelings. Sure, it sucked (*that's what brothers do*, he would assure himself silently, gazing into dark brown eyes heavy with dark circles, *we hurt each other and scream. That's what brotherhood is*), but Tommy needed to learn. He needed to see—Wilbur wasn't the bad guy, he wasn't—he wasn't *cruel*. Or a monster, or dangerous; he wasn't a *bad person*.

(And he cared, he really did. That was something he could never leave behind, how much he loved his brothers. Nothing could ever change that)

His gaze locked once more with Tubbo's, and for the first time Wilbur saw how worn the teen was, how his shoulders shook with exhaustion and desperation, how his forearms crossed over his chest as if to shield himself from danger, breath rushed and unrhythmic. He glanced at Ranboo, watching as they anxiously tugged at their sleeves, face eerily blank, the

only sign of emotion in the twitch of their lips bending into a gentle frown. These strangers... these *children*, they cared for Tommy. *Just like Wilbur did.*

And so, his next words were easy:

“Come on up then. And take your shoes off, please.”

---

Laying on a bed, haphazardly strewn upon a dirtied comforter stained with ink and the ripples of tears, was a notebook. The spine had a wrinkled vein split down the middle, from countless hours face upward and its mouth pried open, its words made easy prey and poachable. It was a harmless little thing, all yellowed pages and midnight scribbles, where math homework danced in the margins of old poetry and to-do lists.

A ballpoint pen lay next to it, tip still dripping black onto the page. There, in messy handwriting with vowels bunched together and consonants half falling of the page's lines, proudly sat the newest entry:

*THURS., JULY*

There are some poems never meant to be read, sequestered away in the countless pages of a notebook thrown into the bottom of a book bag or pushed into the nooks of a closet. There are universes a poet snuffs out before they ever have the chance to expand, before they twist themselves into the air and make known what has only ever shown itself in the safety of haphazard words in a forgotten journal.

And then there are the poems that never stay put. The ones that rip themselves from the page and scream *here I am! Let me sing!* They are the poems a writer hopes will never live past adolescence, that they will remain forever frozen in their child-like fervor, where words swallow gravity and send the world tumbling off its axis. They are the raw poems, the hurt poems. They are the poems made of pain, the ones a poet prays to forget and let die. The ones that never stay dead.

And often, they begin with lines like this:

*At my funeral there will be no flowers.*

## Chapter End Notes

i would like to state that if you saw typos, no, no you did not. (i did a quick skim of the chapter and do not have a beta so pls be gentle it is almost 2 am) /lh

The line Techno quotes is from Ezra Pound's craft essay Prolegomena - i hate this man with a burning passion but this line fit perfect so please do not give him any clout, i had to make a deal with the devil on this one. /srs

but anyway i have had ace Techno sitting in my lil word doc for weeks, and i was very excited to write this chapter and there's more to come for him ahhh!!!

In other news, I have finals coming up so I might not be able to see you guys until Winter Break starts! I am sorry for the long breaks between each chapter but uni is kicking my butt hahah.

as always take care, and any reccs you have drop in the comments!

# **“you hurt because there are things/you’ve never been taught to do”**

## Chapter Notes

Title from “failed avoidance of ‘the body’ in a poem” by Destiny O. Birdsong

Ah okay okay sorry this chapter has been so long of a wait - to be perfectly honest, I just got super depressed and found very little energy to write this chapter when I had other things to write for work, so! it was very late! and for that i apologize! thank you for being so patient and for your kind words of encouragement - they made this whole depression thing a bit easier!

This chapter is literally a behemoth and took so long partly because I really wanted to do my best by it, so hopefully it is okay! So, without stalling too much, here's chapter 10!

TWs (please please read they're a lot but important): mentions of attempted suicide and suicidal ideation (not too graphic!), overdosing, pills/medication, panic attacks, general themes of grief, self-blaming, mentions of car-crashes, cursing, fireworks, ugly crying. Please please stay safe!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

They had run to the bathroom first.

It had been an impulse, as natural as breath. As soon as Wilbur had motioned towards the stairs, face twisted into a determined grimace, Ranboo had kicked off their shoes and started running. The thunder of his heels hitting hardwood, breath ricocheting in his chest; Tubbo was behind them, was clamoring up the steps, harsh gasps; they both were *running*. They couldn't slow down, not now, not when they were so close. Not when Tommy was just behind a door.

(And Ranboo was not afraid, did not feel the mind-numbing terror that had gripped him and Tubbo on that porch, suffocating the flames of anxiety and rage licking at their lungs. He was not afraid because he had been here before—running, gasping, eyes blown wide as if it would all come collapsing with a single blink. *Please*, he had asked before, *please give me a chance, let me just get there. Give me a chance to fix this*)

“What the—hey! Why are you running?” They could hear one of the brothers (*Techno*, they remembered dimly, *Pinkie Pie's alter ego*) shout, voice pitched upwards in panic. Faintly, there was the mumble of Wilbur cursing whatever god still was up there. Ranboo payed them no mind, leaping over the final step and dashing down the hallway heavy with early-morning shadows. It was muscle memory that had them taking a left as the hallway split into two, had them passing the first door where light flickered underneath the crack and its hinges began to



squeak open, past the second that was open wide and empty, and to the third door down the hall.

They stopped abruptly, ignoring the quiet *oof!* Tubbo let out as he ran into the taller teen. A chill danced its way up their spine, teasing at the tenseness in their shoulders as they stared blankly in front of them. At *It*.

Ranboo sucked in a breath. Behind him, Tubbo sighed a gentle *oh*.

The bathroom door: a pristine white framed by hung childhood art-projects and pictures of first-days-at-school, bottom lip warped from water damage and age. Ranboo didn't remember the pictures from the first time they had come over; they had barely processed the way the floorboards whined under their feet, how the doorknob wiggled stuck before Ranboo had forced it open with a harsh twist. Really, it all was a blur of panic and raised voices, of Tubbo yammering nervously in his ear as he banged on the bathroom door. *There's no room in my memories for the minute*, he had explained to his father once, *not really. I get vague impressions of something, never details*.

The water damage hadn't been there either. Not before...

"Ranboo?"

(A shout, a jammed door. A boy's quiet sobs, him screaming *open up! Please! I'm right here!* Water's muffled chattering, pipes yawning; someone was crying, why were they crying? Everything was fine, it was fine, *it had to be fine—*)

"What are you two doing—"

"Fuck off! Let me just...Ranboo, can you hear me—"

(Their hands on a too-warm body, a frantic search for a pulse, grasping, reaching. *Look at me! Look at me, don't go to sleep!* And then there was gagging, gagging, just spit and vomit and *Oh God, oh God* they couldn't breathe—)

"Ranboo!" A hand latched on their wrist, and Ranboo eyes fluttered as they were pulled from the door. Their lungs stuttered as they sucked in a breath they didn't know they were holding, hands wildly grabbing at the person's forearms, trying to keep themselves upright. In front of them stood a concerned Tubbo, offering a small smile as he squeezed Ranboo's elbow. "Hey—*hey*. You alright, tall guy?"

Ranboo gasped, shaking their head even as the words *I'm fine* tumbled past their lips. They ignored Tubbo's look of disbelief, focusing on the tightness in their chest as they stared at the egg-shell door. God—that door. For the first time since all of this—since he had gotten another late-night phone call from his best-friend, since he had sped down the streets of Californian suburbia and asked the sun to keep from rising, to give him time, to let him have just a *chance*—he felt fear. Because that door, with the hinges that wailed when he had shouldered it open, that door was the only thing keeping the future at bay. Because truthfully, whatever he saw when he opened that door (water or no water), it would change *everything*.

There would always Before That Night and After That Night, and so, there would always be Before Now and After Now.

Yes, Ranboo was afraid—they were fucking terrified. Because Now, there was nothing but the door; Now, Ranboo wasn't alone. Whatever they found, the others would see.

Because just like That Night, Ranboo had to be strong, had to be the one that kept both Tubbo and Tommy from falling apart. Because Tubbo hadn't been there That Morning or Night, standing in a flooded bathroom as a teenage boy drowned right in front of their eyes. He hadn't been the one to hold Tommy in those first few moments, to place their hand on the teen's chest and beg, *beg*, the universe or any god that it would rise; Tubbo had not been there, and for that Ranboo was thankful. Because for all their forgetfulness, for all the days sat on a pleather couch in a stuffy office with a therapists talking about missing memories and 'trauma responses', Ranboo had never wanted Tubbo to be the one to see That Night. Sure, the boy had been there for the aftermath—where all Tommy could seemingly do was lay in bed and stare at blank walls and hum nonsense under his breath—but that was different, it was more...*distant*. It hurt, God did it hurt, but it didn't *burn* the same way.

Ranboo had never wanted Tubbo to have to see Tommy dying, to feel that burning.

(He had failed, hadn't he?)

"What's going on, are they okay?" Someone asked behind them, and Ranboo resisted the urge to wince. Right, Tommy's brothers were still here. Ranboo turned to see the two young men anxiously hovering nearby, Wilbur with his fingers twitching as if he wanted to reach out, Techno with his shoulders pulled back as if he wanted to move away; Ranboo understood then, looking at two pairs of dark eyes flashing in concern or maybe fear, what Tommy had meant when he said his brothers were parallels. They were two extremities of the same pole—over and under affectionate, explosive and subdued—twins who had spent their whole lives learning to balance each other. Wilbur fisted his hands in his pajama bottoms, coughing awkwardly into his fists, "do you, uh, need help?"

"I'm *fine*," Ranboo couldn't keep themselves from snapping, even as their voice wavered something scratched and rough, "fine. Really. Let's just—I need to...someone needs to open that door. We don't have time to waste." At that the two twins exchanged a glance, eyebrows furrowed and lips pursed. Next to him, Tubbo had begun anxiously shifting from foot to foot, glancing back at the door they were all circled around. Ranboo smothered a sigh—no matter how this went, it wouldn't be pretty. And so now he had a choice: expose Tubbo to whatever may be behind that door, or potentially show Tommy at his worst to two siblings turned strangers.

*God, you really can be a bastard*, Ranboo squeezed their eyes shut, inhaling through their nose. Okay, this was fine, they could handle this. "Look, whatever you might see after we open that door could be...bad. I need to make sure that you guys are in the right headspace to —"

"Oh fuck this! I'm not scared of a *goddamn fucking*—!" Tubbo suddenly hissed and lunged forward, hands gripping at the doorknob and giving it a sharp turn. All Ranboo could do is squeak out a *Tubbo, wait!* and watch, horrified, as Tubbo flung open the white door. Without

so much as a thought Tubbo rushed in, hands fisted at his sides and shoulders squared in determination. Ranboo scrambled after him, eyes blown wide as they tried to reach towards their friend, trying to drag him away, but they were too late.

Upon crossing the threshold that separated the bathroom from the dimly lit hallway, Before Now from After Now, Tubbo stilled. Ranboo heard him suck in a sharp breath, and their heart dropped to their feet—*no*. No, it had to be fine, Tommy had to be—Tubbo couldn't see—it had to be *fine*.

Tubbo's shoulders sagged. "*God...*"

*No.*

"No," Ranboo breathed, ignoring the restless murmuring behind him. Dimly, as he began to knot his fingers in his hair, biting his lip to keep from crying out, he could recognize the sound of retreating footsteps. Ranboo wanted to close his eyes, to pretend this was all one big nightmare and that he would awake, crusty-eyed and off-put to Tommy's spam of stupid memes and Tubbo's 3am rants about combustion reaction mechanisms. *This can't be real*, he wanted to whimper, *this can't be...everything has to be ok. Tommy promised...*

Ranboo's chest heaved, and all they could manage was a whisper, "Tubbo, please. Don't—no. Tell me *no*."

"He's not here." Tubbo's answer was sharp, voice cracking under the weight of his answer, and Ranboo felt their heart stutter in their chest. Their hands fell from their head as Tubbo slumped against the door-frame, both teens dizzy in their momentary relief: Tommy wasn't *here*. Ranboo crept forward, peeking past Tubbo and his shuddering frame to glance into the bathroom—it was empty. There were no running bathtubs or faucets, no pried open medicine cabinets and a boy sprawled on the cold tiles. Out the window over the bathtub, the sun was rising; there was no Tommy.

Ranboo pressed a hand to his chest, wishing he could reach between his ribcage and quell the rapid beating of his heart—there was a chance.

(And there was no room to fuck it up; this time, Ranboo would *help*)

A quiet cough snapped the two teens out of their reverie, and Ranboo twisted to see Wilbur offer them both a perplexed smile, dripping with bemusement and unease's sour bite. "Uh... I'm not really sure what's going on, honestly don't know if I want to know, but aren't you here for Tommy? This is the bathroom."

Ranboo flushed, and beside him Tubbo anxiously cleared his throat. The two exchanged a glance; how could they tell Wilbur that this room housed so much grief inside it? That ingrained in the wood of the cabinets and embedded in the grout between the tiles were memories lost to all but Tommy, a boy with a too-loud voice and too-quiet words? There was nothing that could convey the instinctual fear that gripped Ranboo each time he thought about that bathroom and its clogged drains, no words that could capture the hours Tubbo spent with his phone in hand, pleading in a midnight-dark kitchen for news of his best friend.

There was nothing they could say, and so, all Tubbo could was give a weak smile and declare: “Right. Lead the way, Big Man.”

(Something flashed in Wilbur’s eyes at the nickname, and it might have been the darkness of the hallway or maybe the way the beginnings of morning peeked through the bathroom’s window gently laid itself upon the man’s pallid features, but Ranboo swore they saw pain)

“Sure,” Wilbur said, and it sounded a bit forced, but neither of the teens were in the mood to comment on it, “he’s right down the hall from mine. Techno already went in before us, just to check-in, so they’re probably chatting or something.”

Ranboo grimaced—knowing Tommy, if the two really were talking it wouldn’t be long until it escalated to shouting. It was more likely that they would all walk in on a screaming match rather than just an amicable ‘chat’.

(Ranboo ignored the dread pooling in their stomach; Tommy didn’t do ‘chatting’ with his older brothers, didn’t do small talk. His Tommy wasn’t quiet unless something was wrong)

“Alright, yeah. That makes sense.” Tubbo said, and Ranboo knew then that it made not much sense at all. “Sorry for the, erm, confusion.”

(Something was terribly, irreversibly *wrong*)

“No, no, it’s-it’s fine. Here, Tommy’s just in here.” Wilbur began to shuffle back towards the stair case, where the first door upon ascending to the second floor was cracked ajar. There was still a black scuff from a rowdy volleyball game still emblazoned on the front, and Ranboo’s lips twitched into the beginnings of a smile—that had been a good day, it had been the first time Tommy had invited him over. They had spent the entire day gorging themselves on candy and running around on their sugar-high, for once just two teenagers with no burdens to bear, no therapy appointments or nights spent waiting for fathers to return. Just two friends, reckless and blazing. He had wanted the day to never end.

(But the sun was rising, and both days and nights always had to end sometime, right?)

“Techno, Tommy!” Wilbur knocked on the front of the door before pushing it open carelessly, not waiting for an answer. Ranboo watched, bewitched, as a facade painted itself across the man’s face, thin lips stretching into a glib smile as the exhaustion drained out of his wiry frame and he drew himself upwards, tall and proud. It was like seeing a completely different person from the Wilbur they had met in the living room, hair ruffled with sleep and eyes puffy from crying. This Wilbur’s grin was sharp as the door flung open, his eyes bright with mischief as the contents of the room were shown to the trio in full. “I’ve got some company for you guys right out—oh.”

The bedroom was poorly lit, a desk lamp flickering over countless pages of scribbled-upon paper and dried pens, the teeth of the morning sun’s light sinking itself onto the worn baby-blue rug in front of the bed. And there, sitting upon a white comforter stained with black ink and wetted patches of what could only be the imprints of long-shed tears, was Technoblade. He did not look up as Ranboo and Tubbo stepped deeper into the room, did not so much as flinch as Wilbur sputtered *where’s Tommy?* and whipped his head back and forth in a feverish

attempt to find their little brother. Technoblade just stared at the yellowed pages of a leather-bound notebook and breathed, eyes flicking across the same two pages as if they held the key to the universe. As if whatever was written there could change the world.

When the man finally spoke, his voice fell like snow, crystalline and gentle, and biting cold:

*“At my funeral there will be no flowers.”* Techno read aloud, and Ranboo’s throat seized in fear. Technoblade continued on, and Ranboo didn’t think they could ever forget the way Tubbo had sobbed at the next words that fell from Technoblade’s lips:

*“This, a request I write in the wrinkled pages of thrown away suicide notes.”*

Across the city, a boy stood at the edge of a canyon.

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If asked, Sam would easily say that he was against kidnapping. Typically. *Usually.*

Okay maybe there were *a few* exceptions to the sentiment, one namely being seventeen year-old Tommy ‘Kraken’ Watson.

It had started with a phone call from Puffy at 2:32am, and at the time, Sam hadn’t thought much of it. Sure, Puffy wasn’t one for early morning calls (*very early*, Sam had bemoaned to his sleeping partner), but Sam had been friends with the poet long enough to know that her sleeping schedule was more than just chaotic: Puffy could go days with less than two hours of sleep a night and never once complain about being exhausted, but she could also hibernate for seventeen hours and wake up even more sleepy. Having met in undergrad, Sam had seen Puffy at all stages of sleep-deprivation—pre-finals, post-midterms, and who could forget that one time in junior year where she survived on thirty 5 Hour Energy Drinks for the entire week—so he was not so much as surprised as he was exasperated when he answered the call with a tired *hello?* only to be met with incoherent yelling.

“I fucking knew that man was bad news! As soon as Dream showed me that man’s Insta profile—it’s the glasses! Male manipulators always wear round glasses! And the beanie! Outrageous—”

“Woah, Puffs, what’s going on? It’s like...three.” Sam yawned into the back of his hand, blinking sleep-dust from his eyes as he propped himself up in bed. Next to him, Ponk stirred, grumbling irritably as they tugged the comforter over her head. Sam fought a fond smile, rubbing his eyes with the heel of his palm. “Is someone messing with you? And if so can you send Dream to beat them up instead? It’s kinda late and it’s his turn this time.”

“Oh, don’t worry. I’m already in line to knock that motherfucker out.” Another voice chimed in darkly, and Sam blinked, suddenly awake. *Dream*—oh no, this was not good, not good at all. For all his joking, Sam would rather not have to bail dream out of county jail again for aggravated assault after someone even dared to look at Puffy wrong. The younger man was like an attack dog, especially when it came to the safety of those he loved; *if I have to stop a murder at 3am, I’m going to actually commit murder myself*, Sam couldn’t help but groan,

pushing himself off of bed and slipping a fluffy blanket over his shoulders strewn at the foot of the bed.

Sam hoped he didn't wake Ponk as he shuffled down the hall to the kitchen to make coffee—he would never hear the end of it, and would probably be on dish-duty for the next week. As quietly as possible he turned on the coffee machine, wincing as it let out a thunderous *whirr*, whispering under his breath, “alright, alright, slow down. Who exactly is expecting a beat-down?”

“Wilbur. Fucking. Watson,” Puffy hissed, and Sam flinched so hard he almost dropped his mug, “if I was any less a woman I’d—!”

“Wait, wait, wait, you’re talking about Wilbur Soot Watson, right? Like, Tommy’s older brother Wilbur? Tommy in my third period last year? Like, Tommy from—”

“Yes, yes we all know who Tommy is!” Dream interrupted, voice steely with barely controlled anger. Sam knew it wasn’t direct at him, but it still made him nervous: an angry Dream was a dangerous dream, no matter how sweet the kid could be. “The point is that his dickhead of a brother made him quit the slam team and now Tommy is basically M.I.A.—we’ve been trying to get in contact with him for hours and...”

Dream fell silent and Sam clenched his phone tighter. He absentmindedly ambled towards the fridge, sucking on his teeth as he waited for Dream to continue. *And?* he wanted to demand, to shout, *and what? What’s wrong with Tommy, Why didn’t you call me earlier? Is he okay?* Sure, Sam was protective of all his students (he prided himself on being the ‘cool’ teacher that kids could talk to, the one who hid snacks in his drawers in case a student couldn’t get lunch, the one that hosted the GSA, Building Bridges, and Disabled Student Advocates clubs during his lunch break to give students a safe space), but all the faculty knew that Tommy was *his* kid. When everyone was hellbent on letting the kid fall through the cracks, it was Sam that had stood up to administration; it was Sam who found the kid a tutor and spent hours after class walking him through his homework; it was Sam who had seen a sophomore trouble-maker for what he was: hurting and so alone.

(And Tommy was hurting, so so *bad*. There were always students who were hurting—*God*, there were always too many—but there was something about Tommy’s situation that had made Sam pause. It might have been the way the kid was so expressive, with mournful eyes and a deep frown, or it might have been the way Tommy spoke as if poetry was meant to glide off his tongue, but Tommy made Sam’s heart clench in protectiveness. Because the kid was on the precipice of falling and no one was there to reach for his hand; because he was falling already, and the ones meant to catch him were the ones driving him off the cliff)

“He’s not answering any of our calls,” Puffy picked up from where Dream trailed off, words tight with worry, “so we are currently on our way to his house to talk some sense into the both of them. But I...I think we might be on a bit of a timer, if you understand.”

*A timer.* Sam stalled in his movements, hand hovering over the creamer he was plucking from the fridge. *A timer.* He really couldn’t articulate the terror gripping his lungs in that moment, a dread that he had become far too familiar with. The world of a poet is one constantly overshadowed by the threat of grief; life’s beauty was just as constant as its death, and poets

were privy to all of it. They wrote about leaves upsetting still waters and the villages a river may flood; they wrote about fires and the new growth that came with it; Sam had seen the most brilliant poets fall victim to the reality that beauty was a thing that could only be preserved in words and that heartache could be forever. To feel everything's vivacity so intensely, so vibrantly, meant you felt their loss just the same.

(A peer at a workshop had once told him that poets were at a disproportionate risk of suicide. *The poet is always trying to outrun the poem*, they had said, and he remembered the way their voice had hung with resignation, low and weeping, *but there are some things that a person can't keep ahead of*. Sam had been to too many friends' funerals to object)

Tommy was on a timer. Sam thought if he hold his breath for long enough time would stop.

(Unfortunately, life didn't quite work that way. Loss wouldn't either)

"What do you need me to do? I'm getting into the car now." He found himself saying, coffee forgotten and fridge left wide open as he scrambled to find his shoes in the darkness of the apartment, barely keeping himself upright as he tripped over the blanket slipping from his shoulders. "You guys already on the road? Where are you heading?"

"We're actually pulling into your parking structure right now. We, uh, might've forgotten to tell you we were en route," Dream chuckled apologetically, but Sam could hear the anxiety in his voice from a mile away, "we need you to take us to Tommy's. You're the only one who knows where he lives."

"Okay, what's the plan?"

"We go in and get him out of there," Puffy's tone left no room for argument, flinty and stern like a captain directing her crew, "and then a friend is going to meet us at our special place for a bit of a light show. If Tommy *really* wants to quit the team, we're going to give him a good going-away party."

A chord of hope was struck in Sam's chest—he had to hand it to Puffy, she was never going to let Tommy go without a fight.

"Right, got it. Let me just—" He was cut off by soft footsteps padding down the hallway, and Sam turned to see Ponk standing in the hall's entryway. Sam's stomach flipped as he took in his partner's worried face, how they wrapped their arm close to their chest, lips pressed into a grim line. "...I'm going to call you guys when I get outside. Meet me at my car, level three." He hung up before he received an answer, stuffing his phone into the pocket of his sweatpants.

Ponk's steps were hesitant as he shuffled forward, smile wavering. "Hey."

"Hey." Sam whispered, trying to wipe the fear from his face. He opened his arms open, an offering, and Ponk surged forward for a hug. Sam couldn't help the quiet laugh that escaped him as Ponk burrowed his head into Sam's chest, her arm draped around Sam's shoulders.

"I've got to go."

Ponk's grip tightened. "You're leaving? This late?"

"There's...something's wrong with Tommy. Puffy says he needs help." Sam winced as Ponk pushed him away lightly, hand pressed to his chest as she gave him a questioning glance. "Yeah, it's, um, it might not be a pretty situation. We're kinda on a clock so I need to—"

"What's wrong with Tommy?" Ponk tilted their head in that way that meant they were two seconds away from putting a foot up Sam's you-know-what if he didn't answer. "Where are you going?"

"Well..."

"*Sam.*"

"Okay! Okay! Tommy quit the team and now he's not responding to anyone's texts. So Puffy and Dream are going to drive with me to make sure he's alright. I didn't want to stress you out about it. We're going to be driving and it's late and emotions were going to be high anyways so—"

"Sam," Ponk interrupted, voice firm, "it's fine, I understand. Thank you for thinking about... that. *Me*. Just...just please stay safe, please? Call me or-or text me when you get there, and tell me how Tommy's doing, let him know I care about him, yeah? And let me know when you're on your way home." Ponk's eyes glittered with concern as her fingers curled into a fist on Sam's chest, and she looked down at both of their socked feet, standing toe-to-toe. "Please, *come home*."

Sam fought the urge to cup his partner's face, to hold them close and tell them that everything would be alright, that nothing could take Sam away from their arms other than death itself. And even then, Sam would sooner rip himself from his grave, tear himself from the soil, funeral flowers and all, before he would leave Ponk. He could never leave—Ponk was his, and he was theirs; Sam could never hurt him, not again.

(And the thought send a cold wave of realization over him, had him almost breathless and gasping in awe and *oh*. *Oh*, because Sam realized then that he could not exist without Ponk, not now. Because standing there, in his pajamas with his hands placed softly on their hips and eyes blown wide, he realized that this was how he wanted to live the rest of his life. Here, in this shitty apartment with terrible heating and a too-loud coffee machine. Here, he realized he wanted to marry Ponk)

A wide smile began stretching across his face. *Oh*.

Sam must have stood there for a good twenty seconds, grinning like an idiot as Ponk stared at him blankly, brows raised in confusion (and Sam could practically hear his partner thinking What The Fuck Is Wrong With You?). The only thing that snapped him out of his reverie of frenzied proposal-planning and giddy hopes for wedding-bells was the high-pitched jingle of his ringtone. Fumbling for his cellphone, he saw Puffy's caller-ID pop up, angrily chiming at him to hurry up with every mimic of "Heart of Glass" by Blondie.



Sam backed away, still unable to wipe that stupid smile off his face as he walked backwards from Ponk. The poet in front of him didn't so much as blink as Sam tripped over the carpet and absolute air, looking around wildly for his shoes and car keys. "I, uh, I got to go. Yeah, I'm gonna...yeah, uh, bye."

"Bye! Don't forget your coat!" Ponk shouted as Sam began to stumble through the apartment to the front door, reaching on their tip toes to wave Sam off. "And drive safe! Please!"

Sam paused at the doorway, hand on the silver door-knob as they glanced back at their partner. There was always that guilt that came when Ponk reminded him to drive safe, that crushing pressure on his chest that made him want to fall to his knees, to plead for forgiveness even if it had already been granted. But this time, as he took in Ponk in their entirety, braids wrapped in a silk head-scarf and drowning in a worn Band-T, that guilt felt just a bit lighter; Ponk loved him, and he loved Ponk, so much more than they could ever know.

"Love you," he said, and it was what he always said when leaving for work in the morning, before a ride to the grocery store or a goodbye over the phone, but this time the words felt like he was drowning in them. *Love you*, he said, and knew he meant *I would spend centuries writing odes just to perfect how to describe the way I feel about you*.

But they were on a clock and Sam was running out of time, so for now it would have to suffice.

"Love you," Ponk hummed, a curious smile playing on his lips, "tell Dream not to pop off too hard, alright?"

Sam allowed a laugh, nerves once again alight now that he had been awakened from his love-sick stupor. "Right. I'll call you."

And just like that he was on his way to the parking structure, keys in hands and head spinning. He didn't know what to think, what to do: he was trying to plan a rescue and a proposal at the same time, and God was he so scared for both. But for now, his priority was Tommy—*his* kid—and he would do his best to prove himself worthy of calling the young man a part of his patch-work family.

Because that was what they were at the end of the day, weren't they? A small covenant of miracle workers turned poets, who made music out of language and a home out of a slam team.

And there was no water of the womb that could be thicker than the blood of a covenant shared by artists on a mission.

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A boy stands at the edge of a canyon, and aching he refuses to look down.

In the end, Tommy's 'kidnapping' had been a quick affair. They had arrived to his unlit house at 3:15am, and after a few minutes of knocking incessantly at the front door, Dream had finally got fed-up and scaled the side of the house to Tommy's window on the second floor

(apparently not without Puffy's shrieks of mixed irritation and concern). Upon aggressively knocking at Tommy's window, Dream was let in and the two ended up walking out the Watsons' front door no more than three minutes later, Dream with a smug bounce in his step and Tommy with a wariness heavy in his bones.

(He had been surprised to see Mr. Sam standing in front of the man's silver Chevy, dark eyes sparkling as he offered Tommy a smile so tender that Tommy thought he must've been smiling at someone else; Tommy was used to half-smirks and the tight-lipped politeness of Mr. Sam's expressions, he wasn't used to feeling so *precious* when someone looked at him)

(It wouldn't last for long, though. Probably. Definitely)

Still, Tommy had taken one look at the small party assembled on the front porch, heart strangled in his throat, and announced: "Whatever you've got planned, you can't convince me. I'm quitting the slam, sorry."

Tommy had expected immediate outrage, yells and indignant lectures. He was wrong—Puffy had just given him a terse smile, eyes crinkling with worry and said, "that's alright. We just want to show you something."

After a thirty-five minute car ride of agonizing silence (Tommy sat in the back with Dream, whose gaze was pinned on him, unblinking—it was creepy as fuck), they finally arrived at their destination. *Whatever this 'surprise' is*, Tommy had mused dryly as he slid out of the car seat and shoved the door closed behind him, *hopefully it doesn't end with me dead in the middle of a...desert? National park? Where the fuck are we?*

It turned out that Puffy's surprise was a canyon somewhere off the freeway in the middle of nowhere; Tommy's sneakers kicked up dirt as he followed the team captain up a steep incline, taking in the sprawling landscape of trenches and dried brush dotting the Californian hillside. Growing up, he had passed these canyons with every late-night drive on a freeway, always wondering what lay beyond those hills and ditches, always wondering after what would happen if he stepped out of the car and into the underbrush.

Now, he was pretty sure there were snakes and spiders hiding where it was dark—ew.

But Puffy had said she had something to show him, something important, and so he would stand and wait. It was the least he could do: he knew he was putting the team at a disadvantage dropping out of the slam so late into the season, knew that he was effectively eliminating any chance for survival past bout two, and safe to say he was still fighting off the guilt that threatened to suffocate him. Tommy wasn't stupid, he knew this was all a ploy to get him back into the slam, but he wasn't just going to leave his team out in the cold. He couldn't.

(And maybe he liked the thought of someone having to beg him to stay, to be the musician behind a locked door, strumming the last taunting chords of a song to an entrapped audience. He wanted to be lingering, fingers a breath away from brushing against another; he wanted to be that fear that came when you knew a story was ending)

So now he was here, stood at the lip of a deep trench, looking over the wide expanse of red dust turned blue in the darkness of early morning. Puffy and Dream had left a few minutes ago, vague mentions of ‘setting up’ something and needing to call a friend, and so Tommy was left alone with his sophomore year AP Lang teacher. Tommy wished he could say it wasn’t awkward: while Mr. Sam had been his favorite teacher by far, there still was a tension there, an invisible boundary that practically screamed *I am only a replaceable fixture of your life*. Tommy’s brain might have convinced him that his relationship with his teacher was different, that it was special, but in the end Tommy would graduate high school and Mr. Sam would leave him behind, would find a new ‘troubled’ kid with a low GPA and love for literature and fill the Tommy-sized hole that was left in his wake.

Tommy huffed, squinting at the impending horizon. Quietly, he admired where the beginnings of today’s sunrise were biting at the inky sky, how it reached towards the clouds that still hung, heavy and grey with night-time rain.

“I don’t think I could ever look down,” he blurted without thinking, trying to ignore how Mr. Sam sucked in a sharp breath—it was the first thing Tommy had said since getting in the car. The man exhaled slow, and suddenly Tommy was reminded of early afternoons in the man’s classroom, pretending to hate the readings as he loudly defamed another long-dead author with complaints of ‘over-nuance’. He had heard that long suffering sigh for months, had memorized how Mr. Sam would massage his brow bone and hum in the back of his throat, how he would blink away the exasperation to gently scold Tommy for being too disruptive or redirect the class discussion.

“Oh?” Mr. Sam said, nonplused, and Tommy could tell it was an act. “How so?”

Tommy had learned all of Mr. Sam’s quirks—how he used two Splenda packets but only half of each, how he liked to tap out rhythms on his forearm as students did an in-class essay, how he triple-checked to make sure Tommy was always wearing his seat-belt when driving to slam practice—but it never made that uncertainty go away. There would always be that anxiety, that awkwardness, where all Tommy wanted to ask was *when will you see me for what I am and give up on me? When will you leave?* Because this was temporary, it was always temporary, and Tommy had a bad track record when it came to letting people go.

*It’s not that I’m afraid of heights, never,* he wanted to explain to his audience of one, then, to tear his gaze from the skyline and meet the forest green eyes awaiting him, *but rather that I don’t want to miss the sunrise. I want to memorize this before the end. I want to make this moment into a poem.*

“Got nothing else to watch, big man.” He said instead, chewing on the inside of his cheek. His heart lapsed in its steady rhythm, running askew; he was never a great liar. “Plus, I haven’t seen a sunrise in a while—I want to remember it, y’know?”

Mr. Sam’s hum was noncommittal, a tell-tale sign that he had too much to say but didn’t know how to go about it. Really, for an English major he was piss-poor at communication, and not much of a public speaker. Techno had been the same, always maneuvering through the tornado of thoughts consuming him, picking out words with the care one would pluck a fruit from a tree. Tommy used to wish to have such gentleness, for his words to dragonfly, to

hover before landing—now he understood that his voice was meant to fall heavy like rain, crash like lightning in a storm.

“What is the worst thing you’ve ever done?” Tommy found himself asking, eyes searching for constellations in the blank sky of California; he remembered there being so much more when he was younger. Quietly he traced Orion’s Belt with his gaze as he heard Mr. Sam shuffle forward, the hair on the back of his neck standing up as the man’s deep, rumbling breath sent the wind dancing. It twisted itself in his hair, and Tommy let out a tiny gasp as he shivered.

“Well, according to you I’m ‘old’, so I have a lot to choose from,” Mr. Sam drawled, and there was the sound of leather rustling against cloth. His teacher gave a distracted chuckle, and his voice was controlled as he continued, too airy and strained, “But I think...I think the worst thing I’ve probably done was crash my car. It was, ah, it was really bad. I wasn’t paying attention to where I was looking, and I was...*angry*, and so I just accidentally...” Mr. Sam must’ve shrugged, or ran his hands through his hair, or anything to fill-up the silence threatening to devour them both.

“I hurt Ponk.” The admission was cutting, a knife across skin. “And I’ve done many not-so-right things in my life, but that will always be what I regret the most. That, hurting someone you love, letting your anger and resentment consume you until all you have is just *hurt* and *pain*, you don’t really get over that. Ever.”

*And you can never forgive yourself, went unspoken, never.*

Tommy opened his mouth to reply, to comfort Mr. Sam or at least do something to assuage that self-hatred in his voice, but he found himself speechless. What was there to say after knowing someone’s largest regret? What do you know upon knowing what griefs draped upon their shoulders, what skeletons were dug up from their rest when the lights went down? Mr. Sam had always been somewhat untouchable, a familiar mystery that only revealed itself in slivers presented by other people. Tommy knew Mr. Sam loved poetry, knew he performed during undergraduate and grad school, that Ponk was his partner and they got into an accident, that he loved jasmine tea, but there was always something unknown lurking. What could Tommy say?

*(Look at the expected)*

Tommy finally tore his eyes away from the horizon to find Mr. Sam standing by his side, dark eyes unblinking and left arm outstretched. In his hand hung his jacket—worn leather, roughly loved with an assortment of patches that had been stitched on—swaying gently in the wind that tousled the man’s green-dyed hair.

Tommy swallowed, uncertainty lodged in his throat.

*(And find the unexpected)*

He reached out. The leather was soft under his fingerprints.

Mr. Sam smiled as Tommy shrugged the coat over his shoulders—a hint of a white grin.

“You know in sophomore year I flooded the boys’ restroom?”

His voice did not waver as he began, did not flounder in the silence hung between two poets. Tommy’s voice was steady as he spoke, the wind dutifully filling a ship’s sails, constant in its push towards movement. His hands shook, though: they were always the first thing to betray him, to fumble pens and smear ink. He awkwardly stuffed them into the jacket’s pockets, wincing.

“At first I didn’t really mean to. Well, I mean, like *yeah*, I technically did flood it on purpose I was just—fuck I was so pissed! I had just gotten out of your class where I was absolutely fucked over with a prompt about Whitman, which by the way fuck you for that, and I was just...I was *angry*. At Tubbo and Ranboo for ditching me—which like, fair, I was a bit of a dick to them but still—at *you*, and my dad for-for *everything*! Because I was—”

He choked, words running awry as his airway closed up. He clenched his teeth, hunching forward; God, how could he explain sophomore year? How could he capture that feeling of dread that permeated everything, that knowingness, that everything he would touch would either burn him or turn itself into ash trying. *I was horrible, I was cruel, I was dying, I was hurting, I was a monster—* “I was *drowning*, really, I was drowning, and no one cared enough to notice. Or if-if they did, they didn’t care enough to *help* me. I was sitting alone at lunch that day, you know? Ranboo and Tubbo had finally got fed up with my shit and had decided to eat in the library without telling me, or maybe they forgot I don’t know, don’t care, but they were gone. And I was just alone. I was alone with nothing but a soggy breakfast bar and an empty lunch table. So I just thought, ‘fuck it’. I got paper towels and clogged the sinks and I just remember thinking: *if I’m going to drown, I will make sure everyone else does too.*”

Tommy was aware he sounded hysterical by now, knew that his voice was rising and his hands were flying towards the sky as he gesticulated. But he couldn’t stop the creature rising out of his chest, that pushed against his sternum and beat tauntingly. *You’re losing it*, that thing inside him crooned gleefully, *you’re snapping*.

*The stars are fading, they’re leaving*, he wanted to wail back, to make this world understand, *the stars are fading and I don’t think I’ll ever be ready to say goodbye. I’m not ready to say goodbye—it’s not fair.*

He stumbled closer to the lip of the canyon, the toe of his sneakers sending stray pebbles clattering off into the deep trenches below as he desperately searched the night sky for stars. He could practically feel Mr. Sam struggle not to pitch forward, to place his hands on Tommy’s shoulders and drag him away, but the man knew. Of course he knew: kids like Tommy were always trying to find new ways to dangle, kids who loved rooftops and long-drops, who hid in bathrooms and old playlists, who were meant to *fly*, to slice through air and be airborne. Kids like Tommy, like Dream even; kids like that were fueled by more than the impossible, they were fueled by *anger*.

Tommy sucked in a sharp breath—it wasn’t *fair*. He could feel his chest ache, as if someone was gnawing at the tissue between his ribs, pleading to be released from the cage that encircled his heart. He had taken great care over the past two years to never let that anger out, to never let it demolish everything he held so dear, but he couldn’t take it anymore. He *couldn’t*. He was bitter, and the raw truth of it burnt his throat, left him gaping and whining,

voiceless as he fought to bring air into his lungs. He was bitter; he was just an angry, burning little *boy*, who had been left alone in an empty house meant to crumble into dust. His heart, so keen on giving way to painful stumbles, to murmuring late at night about forgotten birthdays and missing mothers, was meant to be ripped apart by the very beast it tried to lock away.

(*I'm not a monster*, he had heard his brother weep once, late in the night after another screaming match with Dad. His brother had slipped into his room after, had tucked himself under Tommy's covers, comforter and all, and had taken his little brother's hand. *Promise me*, he had pleaded, brown eyes round and glistening in the faint breath of Tommy's night-light cast upon his cheeks, *promise me I'm not a monster*. And Tommy had done so without hesitation)

(Now, he wondered if he could say the same thing about himself)

"I never wanted to die," he gasped. His voice was close to breaking, its airy rhythm straining under the weight of his admission, "not really. It's just that people—my family, my friends—they never made me want to *live*. Because they left me and I can't live alone, never alone. And do you know how much that hurts? To sit in a school bathroom at fifteen years old and think to yourself *there's nothing left for me to do now. I have nowhere to go.*"

Mr. Sam inhaled sharply. "Tommy, that's not—"

"Don't. Don't make me into a liar when I know I'm not one." And he couldn't keep the venom out of his voice, that slick resentment that dripped from his words; he knew he shouldn't be upset with Mr. Sam, knew the man was trying to make him feel better and quell the electricity buzzing under his skin, threatening to fry everything it touched, but he couldn't help it. It wasn't fair, but he should be allowed to feel angry, hell, he should be furious! Sure, Mr. Sam probably cared at the time, Ranboo and Tubbo too, but it didn't change the fact that he thought they hadn't. It didn't make that growling thing in his chest go away. "I felt alone. I *was* alone That Night, and no matter how much you guys tell me you care now, it doesn't change that fact. I'm sorry, but it-it doesn't change what I tried to do."

Mr. Sam must've shifted closer, then, because when he spoke his voice tickled the nape of Tommy's neck. "What...what did you try to do?"

It was an instinct, really, to freeze at that question. Even after Ranboo had found him and dragged him to Tubbo's house, even after the frazzled fussing from Tubbo's parents and pleading for Ms. Underscore not to call his dad, Tommy had never spoken out loud what he had happened That Night.

(*It'll be our secret*, he had said to his two best friends, extending a shaking pinky towards the two teenagers who gawked at him, forcing his shoulders back and chin raised as he declared, *no one has to know. We'll just forget this ever happened and be fine with it, alright?*)

"Tommy, *please.*"

(Tubbo had begrudgingly leant Tommy his pinky, brown eyes burning with a fire Tommy knew too well. *Know that I'm only promising this because I love you*, he had spat, pale face

glowing brilliant under the fluorescent light of his kitchen, *but know that one day you'll have to tell someone. One day, you'll have to let someone help you*)

Tommy could practically feel Tubbo's pointed glare from here—it only made sense that in the end, Tubbo would have his way. He felt the brittle beginnings of a smile twitch to his face, *that fucker's always got to be right about something.*

"They don't talk about how much you mourn before you attempt suicide." There was a hollowness there, as if his words were coins dropped into a well with no end in sight, forever hurtling downwards. Forever falling. He licked his lips, tasting the dew of dawn's arrival on his tongue, the aftermath of midnight rain. With a heavy swallow, he continued: "They don't talk about that dread. The way you sit on the bathroom floor for hours with a pill bottle in your hand, and really think to yourself *how much will I be missing if I do this?* If I succeed? If I... 'give up'?"

"You know, I cried for days before That Night, trying to say goodbye," a bitter laugh lodged itself in his throat, trapped in the quivering folds of his voice box, "I thought I had made peace, had said goodbye to everything worth loving. I was already counting out the pills and playing my favorite songs and it hit me like *bam, I will never get married.* It was like-like a shotgun. A bullet hole; I won't get to see my own wedding day, hell, even my brothers' wedding days. And for some reason that...that *terrified* me."

Behind him Mr. Sam did not speak, did not move from where he was looming over Tommy. But Tommy could imagine the tears threatening the fall, the quiver in the man's lower lip as he curled his fingers into fists—Mr. Sam had never been expressive, but he had always been a bit of a crier, always trying to hide his sniffles behind a tissue after every sad movie in class or book ending. *It's okay*, Tommy wanted to reassure the poet, even as he found himself voiceless as he gazed at the pink clouds beginning to rise from the horizon, *enough people I care about have cried over That Night. I don't need someone I care about to waste anymore tears on me.*

"And I don't even know if I want to get married, or if I'm even into that romantic stuff, but, like, that thought of 'holy shit I don't even get a chance'...that was the scary part, y'know?" He ignored the way in which his eyes stung, how with every sentence his tongue grew heavy. Long gone was that furious little beast inside his chest, replaced with a mournful howl that rattled his ribs and had his stomach flipping. He bit the inside of his cheek: he had to keep it together. He couldn't let Mr. Sam see him break. "And knowing that, sitting alone on a bathroom floor knowing that I was going to die alone, it hurt, you know? Like, I would never get to do those teenager things—never go to prom, never get my driver's license, never, *fuck*, I don't know, fall in love? Have my first kiss? I was giving up all of that! But there was no future for me, and it was pointless to keep pretending there was. I was tired of living a lie, but somehow coming to terms with that truth, that this was it for me...it hurt *so much.*"

And suddenly the lightning struck, white-hot and cleaving and *painful*. God, it hurt: those years of pretending that he was fine, that he was excited for the next day, that he hoped and dreamed and loved and *wanted*. Because he had wanted so much when he was younger: he had wanted to learn how to play his brother's favorite songs on piano, had wanted to go to every single one of Techno's fencing tournaments, had wanted to hug his father so tight that

his arms would give out. He choked down a sob, teeth sunk into his bottom lip to keep it from wobbling—*God*, he just, he had just wanted...

He had wanted to be *loved*, unconditional in the way Tubbo's parents still kissed him on the cheek before he left for school, or how Ranboo would prattle on about the shards of memories he still had of his mother and aunt after each weekly phone call—he had wanted someone to love enough for routine, to say *even if you change, this, at least, will remain the same*. He wanted to wake up each morning to a father over the stove and older brothers trading jibes back and forth, to teasing pinches under his armpit when he hogged the TV and mischievous kicks under kitchen tables; he wanted easy affection and easier sorrows, a family member's warm embrace curled around his torso, a hold that said *look, I am here, I am here and no one can hurt you now. Not even yourself*. He wanted someone to pull him close to their chest, to cradle the back of his neck with their palm and shield him away from the world, he wanted—

"I want my mom," and those were the words that broke him, had him doubling over as sobs clawed their way up his throat. He heaved, face tight in pain as his fingers gripped his collar, trying to pull it from his wheezing throat, to open up his airways past this harrowed longing that threatened to suffocate him. He gurgled something raw in his throat, gasping through his tears, "I-I want my *mom*. I want my-my mom. *I just want my mom.*"

He couldn't stop the words tumbling from his mouth like snow from an avalanche, that sent the molecules of oxygen around him spinning and reeling away. He couldn't stop speaking, and God, he thought he might die from it. He gave a pathetic whine, stumbling forward. His knees buckled and he pitched forwards, unable to stop himself as his forehead pressed into the lip of the canyon's yawning mouth, sand intertwining itself into his tangled hair as he bit down the pleas threatening to rip him open.

*I'm sorry, I'm sorry*, his teeth sunk into his palm, staining his front teeth red, *I'm sorry you left because of me. I'm sorry I ruined my brothers' lives. I'm sorry I ruined Dad. I'm sorry I still want you to love me.*

"Mom," he wailed, and the wind shivered at his cries, "mom, *please*. Please, I need you, I need you I need you, please come back—!"

And then there were hands on him, rough, warm; they were heavy on his back, trailing the curvature of his spine as a voice above him gently hummed. "I know," they whispered, and Tommy thought his heart would break at the tenderness there, shelved between the vowels and consonants, "shh, it's alright. I know, I know, I'm sorry, love."

"I just-just want my mom—"

"I know, sweetie. I'm sorry, I'm so sorry."

"—it's my fault, it's my fault! I killed her, it's all my—!"

The fingers tightened on his shoulders and suddenly he was being pulled up, up and away from the ground into someone's chest. He blinked as arms encircled him, head tucked into



the small space between their sternum and trembling forearms, and *oh*. Tommy hesitantly looped his arms around the person's neck, eyes wide in wonder. This, this was...

(It was fingers in his hair and spring season watching the sparrows mount a nest; it was plucking clovers from front lawns and hands sticky with honeycomb; it was an arm hanging over the bedside on late-afternoons as rain pattered on the rooftop; it was fall and summertime and cheeks dusted with freckles and laughter and blowing wishes out of dandelions and humming and it was *home*)

*It was nice*, Tommy settled on, sobs finally subsiding into sniffles as he buried his face into their collarbone. He breathed in coffee-grains and cedar aftershave; *Sam*.

"It's not your fault," the man said, and Tommy was breathless at the conviction in his voice, the wavering fury that lined his words as he spoke, "it was *never* your fault, and I'm so, so *sorry* that someone ever made you believe that. You don't—Tommy, you deserve everything good in this world. You do. And I'm sorry I haven't been there to give it to you."

Tommy managed a fragile chuckle, bashfully smearing the pinpricks of blood from his palm on the front of his shirt. "It's-it's alright, Big Man. You can't fix everything: some things were meant to be broken, y'know?"

The grip around him loosened and Tommy cringed as Mr. Sam began to untangle himself from Tommy's hold—of course, he cursed himself, of course he had to screw it up! The one time he had a hug, the one time someone had cared enough to pull him close, he had to mess it up with that damned mouth of his. *Figures*.

He shot a furtive glance up at Mr. Sam from where he was curled on top of his lap, and his flickering smile dropped. *Oh*.

The man's deep eyes glistened with tears threatening to fall, eyes red-rimmed and puffy from those already shed. Mr. Sam worked his jaw, lips wobbling as he seemingly tried to figure out what to say (and Tommy's heart clenched at that, at rendering his teacher speechless with his temper tantrum. That was no good). Mr. Sam's hands floundered near his chest before falling to Tommy's hands, gently clutching their bruised palms as if gripping the teen too tight would make him shatter—Tommy wasn't in the position to say it wouldn't.

"You're not broken." The man settled on finally, the wrinkles near his eyes crinkling as he gave Tommy a watery smile. He gave Tommy's left hand a little squeeze. "You were never broken. Tommy, you have been dealt a very hard hand at life, there's no doubt about that, but I want you to remember something: you are Tommy-fucking-Watson. You are a poet, and an amazing one—you see all of the withered and dirty and *bad* parts of the world and you make it into art. You are a friend, and damn, you're a good one—I can see the way you act with Tubbo and Ranboo, how you bicker with Dream. You would walk backwards outta hell for them, you would level the Earth if they asked you too. And Tommy, here's the best part..."

Mr. Sam leaned closer, eyes gleaming as he whispered, "you are *human*. You sleep and you breathe and you laugh and you *cry*, because you are human. You wake up every day, go to bed every night and you dream so many unimaginable things—that's what makes you amazing, Tommy. Not just the grades you get or friends you have or, hell, even the poems

you write; you are the most human out of all of us, and I'm so grateful I've gotten to experience that humanity first hand. In a world that tries to break you, you spread love. And that, my friend, is what makes Tommy 'Kraken' Watson who he is: *love*.

"And I love you," Mr. Sam sniffed, "so, so much. And there's so many people here who love you—even when you push us away, even when you don't want us or love us back, we will *always* love you."

There is a feeling that comes after a realization, that momentary pause where the static in your brain short-circuits and there is nothing but resounding silence. Very few times in Tommy's life has his head gone fully quiet, where the images and language getting tangled together in the mesh of his brain's grey matter and wrinkled tissue finally ceased. When he was younger, he could spend hours just thinking, turning words over in his head as he tried to solve the unasked question always pressing against the back of his eyes, that question of: *what does this all mean?* What did this life he was chosen to lead, the path he was thrown upon and forced to tread, what did it all amount to? He had wondered—sitting in that bathroom stall, after football games and sleepovers at Tubbo's house, hours mumbling poems to the emptiness of his bedroom and to the clutter of Kinoko's—what was he here for? What was the 'master plan' of that great entity out there?

Now, as Mr. Sam's tears trickled from his cheeks onto his stubbled chin, dripping into Tommy's lap and staining his jeans a mourning blue, Tommy thought he might have a vague idea.

"*Sometimes, you don't die when you're supposed to,*" poetry found itself on his lips, lighter than the air under a sparrow's feathers, twisting alongside the blade of his tongue, "*and now I have a choice. Repair a world, or build a new one inside my body.*"

Before him Mr. Sam huffed a timid laugh, shaking his head as he used the heel of his hand to wipe at the wetness on his cheeks. His tone was dry as he humored Tommy, teeth gleaming in the morning light, "*Oh my friends, my friends—*"

"—*bloom how you must, wild until we are free.*" Tommy finished, and he rested his head against Mr. Sam's chest, lips splitting into a crooked grin as he felt the rise and fall of the man's chest from where his forehead pressed into the man's cotton shirt. He could stay like this forever, he thought, just sitting in the warm embrace of Mr. Sam's arms, just swapping poetry under the early-morning daylight as they waited for the sun to rise in full. His grin fell into a soft smile. "I think, for now at least, building a new world sounds nice."

Mr. Sam's responding hum rumbled in the wide barrel of his chest, and Tommy fought a giggle at the way it buzzed in the hollow of his ear. "Well, that settles it then."

The teacher let go of Tommy's hand to lean forward, casually reaching into the pocket of the jacket draped over Tommy's shoulders. Tommy lifted his head, blinking in surprise as his teacher pulled a cell-phone out of his pocket; *not to be a dick*, he thought, *but post-mental break down is a bad time to be updating your Facebook profile*. "What are you..."

"Puffy said that once you made your choice to let her know to, and these are her words not mine," Mr. Sam muttered absentmindedly, fumbling with his phone as he typed out a text

one-handed. Tommy tried not to laugh at the way the man squinted at the screen, *old fucker*. Mr. Sam finally seemed to get a hang of it, and tapped the SEND button with a triumphant cheer, “quote, ‘start the light show’!”

“Literally what the fuck are you—”

He was cut off by a shriek. The early morning was unsettled by a terse whistle of something moving through air, a body slicing through the lightening sky and its pink clouds that clung close to the morning horizon. Tommy twisted, hands still clenched in Mr. Sam’s shirt-front as he craned his neck to find the source of the noise, and—*there*.

A lone firework splintered the space between dozing stars, singing as it propelled itself closer and closer to the remains of yesterday, unraveling itself as it crackled. Tommy pushed himself off of Mr. Sam’s lap, rushing to stand as he kept his gaze pinned on the thing cackling gunpowder. Behind him, Mr. Sam laughed at his boyish excitement.

Then—*boom*.

Tommy gawked as dawn’s sky broke into an array of colors, the shimmering of frenzied reds and oranges and purples that had his eyes wide, irises shining with glee, reflecting the blooming unfolding before him. He couldn’t fight the grin on his face if he tried, illuminated in the vibrant plumes of color above. A laugh bubbled out of him, incredulous with joy and shock at the bouquet of fireworks before him: he wanted to throw his hands up and cheer, to clap and holler and scream at the world *look! I made it, look at what I’ve seen!*

But all he did was stuff his hands into the pockets of Mr. Sam’s jacket and smile, transfixed by the sight above him—at this gift, temporary and fleeting and burning, but brought by those that had chosen him as one of their own. By his family.

His eyes began to water.

*Yes, he thought, a new world might be nice.*

## Chapter End Notes

the poem quoted by Tommy and Sam to each other is "Cento Between the Ending and the End" by Cameron Awkward Rich, who is just phenomenal. Check them out! Also c!Awesamponk propaganda is my favorite propaganda even tho their canon relationship is no more :(

oooof. not going to lie writing that chapter was hella triggering for many reasons but im glad its done! Thank you all for reading and again being so patient, and see y'all next time!

Also feel free to follow me on twitter if u wanna see behind the scenes or just me talk dumb shit! I can be found @zeeskeit5! This is also a reminder to check out some of my

writer boundaries up there bc i sometimes cant get to y'all questions in the comments, and also a double reminder not to cross post my fic it makes me very sad and very mean so! please dont do it!

take care loves, and as always, send me poetry recs in the comments!

# **“We are the sons of flint and pitch.”**

## Chapter Notes

Title from "I see the boys of summer" by Dylan Thomas.

I am not going to lie I have tried to write this note three times and keep accidentally deleting it so I'm not even going to have a preamble. I am so exhausted, but I hope y'all enjoy the chapter!

TWs: funerals, loss of parent, panic attacks, going non-verbal (and some internalized ableism about that), suicidal ideation, mentions of medication and alcohol, reckless driving, implied physical abuse/child abuse, implied self harm, fireworks, and a whole lot of self loathing. I think I got all of them but let me know if there are any major ones I missed! Please take care of yourselves!

and here, finally after many months of me procrastinating, is chapter 11.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

His first funeral had been his mothers. Well, that wasn't quite right—the first funeral he remembered had been his mothers. There must have been some long-estranged uncle on his father's side, or maybe the neighbor down the street, but the first funeral that Techno had ever really seen was his mothers. The memory was hazy: had been eight-or-so, fitted in a too-tight bowtie and dress shoes that bit into the skin beneath his ankle, and there had been a solemn, elderly pastor with a solemn, gravelly voice and flowers on a wooden casket. It had started in a church (this, he remembered because of the uncomfortable wooden pews he had sat in for hours, back rigid and aching), and the procession had followed the white-gilded hearse to a graveyard with countless acres of polished stone, each one just as gleaming and forgettable as the next.

It had not rained—he thought that it was supposed to rain at funerals.

Techno hated funerals, not that anyone particularly enjoyed them, but he hated them with a particular passion. It might have been the way his shoes were rubbing into the back of his heel, how the suit was too warm and how he couldn't get his hair to lay flat despite the copious amounts of gel his father had slathered in it, but he despised that day. He hated how his twin brother had stood next to him, big eyes watering an bottom lip wobbling, hands twitching as if he wanted to reach forward and pull their mom out from the earth or maybe hold Techno's hand; he hated how his father sobbed as he threw a handful of dirt on his mother's lowered casket.

He hated the flowers the most, maybe. How the wind puffed its timid breath on the roses' petals, the morning mist swaddling the fresh-cut lilies—he hated it. *It doesn't fit her*, he

couldn't help but think, watching as the gentle sun laid rays of light to rest upon the gleaming casket, *it doesn't feel like Mom. Too clean, too simple.* His mom's favorite flower had been morning glories; she had liked how fickle they were, how they bloomed only to shrivel once the moon rose. When Techno had pointed this out to his father on the ride back to the house, Phil just broke into tears.

(His father had cried again that night, and almost every night after. It had terrified Techno, more than he'd like to admit. At night he laid with his face pressed into the crook of his twin's neck, hands loosely gripping the comforter Wilbur had swaddled them both in, shivering alongside his father's sobs that shook the walls' bones. Now, he understood his father's grief to be too large for the frame of their little two-story house; his father was no flood, was no thunder crashing upon the landscape and washing things ruined. He was just a man who had lost too much too soon. He was a husband without a wife; he was a father, lonely)

It had been years since Techno had last attended a funeral or gotten an invite—he had not yet entered that stage of adulthood that was waiting for grief to come in the mail—and for that he was grateful. He was grateful to put away the pointy-toed shoes and hair gel, to hide away black slacks and pretend that everything was alright. That his voice-box wasn't a thing moments from shattering, that his brother wasn't a plane-ride-or-two away and didn't take three prescriptions each morning; he could pretend that his father slept through the night, that his little brother wasn't a boy dragged down by the ghost of a woman he had never met.

And God, did Techno pretend.

Middle school, high school, college—all of it was nothing more than the flitting scenery of a play, and he the sole traveler of the globe's stage, disentangling himself from the minuscule lives of characters acting out their scripts. He had few acquaintances and kept even fewer friends. His professors welcomed him warmly and showered him with praise, but attention to anything other than his coursework was superfluous and unwanted: Technoblade did not care for affection, not really. He had his father and his twin and his little brother, and that was enough.

(More than enough—it was too much. He did not think his heart could take another funeral, not to mention three. *I do not care if it makes me selfish*, he had mused to himself one afternoon, picking at the fraying edges of the cardboard sleeve of his coffee cup, *please let the universe take me before my brothers. Please.* And he knew it was an unfair wish, knew that it would ruin Wilbur to have to bury his twin, that it would kill him, but Technoblade couldn't see another mismatched bouquet sitting on top of a coffin. He couldn't)

(It was only memories of his father's midnight cries that kept him from wishing he'd be the second Watson to go)

But now, sitting on in the passenger seat of his brother's car with a battered notebook in his hands, he was afraid of what happened when the theater light went out.

“Fuck,” Wilbur was muttering, eyes rimmed tender and pink and flickering frantic, “fuck, fuck, *fuck!* How did we let this happen? How could we—how did we not notice he was gone? Christ, Techno, we were both awake all night! How did we not—”

“Focus on the road, Will,” Techno minded his brother half-heartedly, knuckles white as he gripped the leather cover of his little brother’s notebook. His fingers stalled over a thin scratch upon its face, perhaps made with a careless scratch of a pen. He sighed, “getting worked up about it won’t solve anything.”

They had been on the road for all of thirty minutes, but it had felt like years as the traffic lights blinked from red to yellow to green, as each mile brought them either farther or closer to a missing boy. Technoblade never enjoyed car rides—they made his stomach turn unpleasantly—and now was no different. Absentmindedly, his thumb slid over the cracking spine of Tommy’s notebook.

“That little fucker better be alright or I’m going to...he can’t be...*fuck!*” His brother jerked a harsh left, gritting his teeth as he tugged the steering-wheel to his right. Wilbur hissed a curse as their front bumper skimmed the curb—hopefully they didn’t have to get any detailing done, Dad would be pissed. Techno shifted uncomfortably in the passenger seat, eyes wide as he watched traffic lights go unheeded, blurs of red and yellow in the night speeding past. Carefully, he tried to exhale.

“Wilbur, if you don’t calm yourself and *slow the fuck down* we are going to get into a car crash.” He knew his voice sounded frenzied, knew by the way his throat grew tight and sore with fear, that he was moments away from snapping. Technoblade did not loosen his grip on the notebook, clutching it as heat wished up his neck in angry-red tendrils and splayed across his cheeks. It was fine, he wasn’t panicking, he *wasn’t*. He couldn’t.

(*I can’t deal with you right now*, he wanted to scream at the man at the wheel, *I need you to go back to before, when you were just my older-twin-brother and we could get through anything*. But he felt that familiar tingle underneath his chin, the one that meant soon he would be nothing more than an empty-voice box. Silent; *I need you to stay here with me*)

“Oh, right! Let’s just pretend to be calm and collected like good ol’ Techno and things will sort themselves out! Of course! How could I *ever* be worried over our little brother writing a fucking *suicide note* and then disappearing for who knows how long! I should just pack my bags now and leave like you always—”

“That’s not *fair*—”

“Of course it’s not fair!” Wilbur’s foot thumped against the breaks and the car screeched to a stop, seatbelt chewing into Techno’s throat as he lurched forward with a yelp. The car behind them blared its horn, twisting away from them as the two narrowly missed a collision. Techno hissed as the vehicle blurred past them, so close that it rattled the frame of the Watson’s family car; *Christ*, he struggled to breathe, *holy shit, Christ. Reminder never to get in the car with an emotional Wilbur. Got it.* Next to him, his twin was panting as if he had just ran a mile, dark eyes blown wide as he heaved. Techno opened his mouth to shout, to rip into his brother for doing something so dangerous and blatantly reckless, until the sight of his brother made him pause.

Wilbur bottom lip was trembling. All of him was trembling.

*Oh*, he realized dimly, *a panic attack*.

His brother had had panic attacks since a young age, even before their mother died. At first they had been manageable—late at night, when his brother’s chest would grow tight and angry and Techno was the only one there to grip his hand, he would help his twin breathe—but years passed and soon Wilbur had outgrown Techno’s support. No longer did Technoblade squeeze his brother’s wrists and count...*one, two, three, good, out, four, five...* no longer did Technoblade open bedroom doors without knocking and tucked himself under his brother’s comforter.

They were adults now, a bitter name, no need for night lights and bedtime stories. No need for twin brothers.

“Wilbur,” Techno murmured, reaching forward to rest his hand upon the man’s forearm, fingers hesitant upon the wrinkled fabric of his jacket. His twin didn’t so much as shudder at the contact, wide-eyed stare trained upon the horn of his steering wheel. Techno licked his lips, “it’s okay. We...we’re going to find him. Right? We’re okay. You’re okay. Right now, you need to breathe with me, alright?”

“Oh, fuck off.” The words were sharp, ragged air piercing unruly lungs. Technoblade blinked owlishly as his brother panted, knuckles white from gripping the wheel as he gasped. There was a moment, a heart beat or two, where his brother seemed to be willing his voice not to shake, for his arms not to shudder with the weight of it all. “You-you don’t get to pretend that it’s going to be okay. *Nothing* about this is okay. Our brother is gone, Techno. We have no idea where he is, where he went—fuck, we have *no* idea. That...I can’t—Techno I can’t pretend its *fine*.”

(*Atlas*, Techno couldn’t help but muse to himself then, fingers still where they lingered upon his brother’s arm, *a man with a broken spine. If I could have named you, it would have been Atlas*)

“I’m not asking you to pretend,” and he knew the olive branch was nothing more than a twig, shivering in the wind’s howling embrace, “but I am asking you to trust me. Look, I know what’s in this...this book looks *bad*, but we can’t jump to any conclusions.”

His brother did nothing but allow a soft exhale to enter the air, lips pursed as he squeezed his eyes shut. Techno was no good with metaphor, no good with fine ornament, but he felt like a man upon the precipice of a cliff that had already done its damage. He was Lycomedes, he supposed, and he was afraid he knew who had pushed off the edge. Slowly his brother’s head rose from where it hung, neck inching up vertebrae by vertebrae until his pallid face red shone with the cast shadows of a traffic light. He reached forward to kill the engine—Techno’s stomach turned as it sputtered into quiet.

A breath.

“Give me the book, please.”

Deep down, he knew he should say no. He knew that whatever Wilbur was about to do, whatever he plucked from those tear-stained pages, would ruin them. But still he handed over the moleskin without hesitation, without so much as a batted eyelash—Wilbur was his older brother, after all. In the end, humans were deceptively simple that way.



Wilbur's touch was gentle as he pried the notebook open, a reverence in the careful thumbing-through of pages: an archaeologists uncovering a new find, a sinner pressing his cracked palms to a holy relic. Techno sucked on his teeth as his brother found whatever page he was looking for, at the thinned lips and shaking hands.

*"There will be no white lilies stuck to cherrywood casket,"* Wilbur read aloud, and perhaps the script was tearing itself apart at the margins. Because Technoblade didn't understand this act, how the stage seemed to crumble beneath his feet. Next to him, Wilbur heaved a troubled breath, *"there will be no pre-wilting roses or orchids weeping in the iron fist of a father or Forget-Me-Nots in twin palms..."*

*"Instead, I imagine my funeral as I am: there is a thing lost at sea."*

(When Techno was eight, his father had asked him to give his baby brother a name. It wasn't much of a prize—Wilbur had outright refused, and Phil was too overcome with grief to do more than change the baby's diapers and put him to bed—but Techno had treated it like one nonetheless. He had poured over every book he owned while Tommy had been in the NICU, circling names he thought might work, and he had found it in a second-hand picture book about Greek myths. When he scrambled to his father, a grin missing a few teeth and excited rambling, his father's face had pinched with confusion. He had chosen the name Theseus)

*"It is weathered by salt water and unanchored. It is sinking, At my—"* and there was a fracture in the earth, a sinkhole threatening to swallow, *"at my funeral, the sky opens her mouth to pour. At my funeral, the river overflows."*

(Did he regret it now?)

"Wilbur," a plea, "Wilbur, I can't—"

*"Flowers do not grow underwater."* The thunder bolt striking the river, its veins pulsing, reaching. Wilbur would not stop—as long as there were words on the page, Wilbur would not let Tommy go unheard. *"I learned this from a brother. Or two. I learned that grief is a thing of threes: there is no room in a mourning house for a fourth flood. I live in rooms full of water and shipwrecks. I do not miss the flowers."*

*"Really, I have never seen them. At night I dream of a mother I have never...I dream of a...I—"* Wilbur grit his teeth, a low growl building at the back of his throat as the words seemingly caught. For a moment, Technoblade thought his brother would not be able to continue, would heave his breath into silence alongside his twin. But Wilbur was more stubborn than he was, less cautious, and so he continued, *"I dream of a mother I've never met. She, fuck, she has no head. Just hands. And she holds me as if-if my spine was always meant to be bent. Curled into her arms."*

A pause. Then words softer than cream: *"Cradled."*

*I don't think Tommy could ever be a poet,* he had thought to himself, back when Wilbur had came back from that cursed open-mic and his teenage brother had dashed up the staircase to his room, *I don't think he has it in him. There's not enough softness in that kid: he's too many rough edges. Too...much.* But that line, the way it twisted itself down his throat, how it

nipped shyly at his ribcage and asked to be let in—Technoblade did not like to admit when he was wrong.

*“I dream of funerals, and home grown alliums. I dream of newly...newly dead sons. And their mothers. There is ivy tickling my chin, soft earth a cushion underneath my heavy skull.”*

And Technoblade knows the next line, had memorized them as he stood in his brother’s bedroom, hand tugging at his night shirt as he scrambled to keep his heart from beating itself dead. Thinking, *oh God. Oh God.* Feeling the dread tingle at his fingertips as he waited for it all to make sense, because this couldn’t be real. His brother—God, his *baby brother*—could not have written This. He could not have felt that horrible Thing the ink smeared on the page, this chicken-scratch handwriting, rushed and stretched thin as if Tommy had plucked it carelessly from between his ribs, could not be Theseus’ ending.

(Because Techno was the one meant to go next, and he didn’t know what he’d do if the sun rose and he had lost his little brother)

*“Truthfully, I am already there—I hear the soil is warm this time of year.”*

Silence, and death.

He had grown to make a home in this quiet, learned to take the ear-rupturing void in doses and savor the nights of rain pattering on a dorm roof or the sound of your brother plucking at guitar strings. He learned that if he gave his fears a name, gave the quiet threatening to drown him a label, he could pack it away into categorized boxes when the music came; he learned that it was temporary, of course, everything was temporary, but that it was persistent. Silence and death. He learned how to identify one brother by his muffled cries at night and the other by his absence. Persistent: he learned that if you just put your head down and worked hard and got that scholarship and graduated *cum-laude* from your top-tier school, it didn’t matter that you went hours with your lips sewn shut by something invisible when the sun set.

It didn’t matter if his mother was gone, that his father was a ghost and his both his brothers soon to follow—Technoblade knew quiet.

So why did this one hurt so much more? Why did the sound of his brother’s breath trembling his chest, barely a flutter, why did it feel as though the world had already ended?

Silence and death. Silence, and then: “This is all my fault.”

His gaze shifted from the dashboard, watching, resigned, as tears slowly tracked down Wilbur’s cheeks. The man had apparently unbuckled his seatbelt to draw his long legs up to his chest, curling around the notebook like a street-dog with a bone. The ragged breaths that had once racked his frame eased into slow, rueful sobs—his brother cried like a prayer, teeth grit as he tried to hide the salted tears spilling over his waterline, wheezing a hymn alongside his gasps. Wilbur cried and Technoblade thought maybe both his brothers were always meant to be poets, because who else could make grief look so easy? Made it flow into a song as it exited his chest? Because Technoblade could not cry, not even as the script began to unravel itself.

“This is all my fault and I don’t know how to fix it,” his brother’s voice broke under the admission, and Wilbur coughed through his tears, “I-I-I don’t, don’t know how to...I can’t put it back together. I don’t know how to. I can’t put him back together anymore.”

“Wilbur,” he murmured, hands shaking as he cupped them to his own chest, afraid that he would feel his heart crumble beneath his fingertips, “Wilbur. It’s not all your fault, it’s...I promise it’s not.”

“No! You don’t get it! None of you do—it was my job to make sure he was okay! Mine! I was the one there, I was the one that—that was supposed to teach him to drive and shave and—and, *God*, I was supposed to be there! But I was a coward, or-or, *tired*, so tired, *and I left him*.” Wilbur’s palm flew to cover his mouth, a dawning horror furrowing his eyebrows. For a moment, Technoblade thought that Wilbur would retch all over the car. Instead, his brother just smothered his wail with his shuddering hand. “I left him. Oh my God, Techno, I *left*. I left him alone in that house and I didn’t look back. I *yelled* at him. How could he ever forgive—Techno, what do I do if he’s dead?”

And Techno didn’t have an answer, didn’t know how to clean up this mess. He was that kid again, standing in front of a six-foot deep hole with a missing voice box wondering about lilies. So he did all he could do.

A seatbelt unbuckled; his brother stiffened as warm arms wrapped around him.

Together they did not breathe, could not.

“I love you,” he said instead, face buried into his brother’s shoulder. His lungs burned as he felt his brother’s heartbeat under his hand. They were at once so small, just two little boys who had never outgrown their grief, “I love you. I forgive you. I love you. I love you. I love you.” And those words held so much—nights hiding away from screaming matches downstairs, empty car-rides in the passenger seat on the way to tournaments, early-morning phone calls from college dorms with bottles of vodka stowed under the bed, silence, medication flushed down the toilet and locked doors—they were the unearthing.

“It’s all my fault—”

“—I forgive you—”

“—I ruined it, I ruined it all. I always *ruin* it all—”

“—I love you, Wilbur, I love you. Please, *please* stop crying.”

“You can’t love me out of this one, Tech.” His brother let out a bitter laugh, stuck at the back of his throat with all the spit and weeping. “I don’t think loving will fix any of it.”

(*I don’t think I could survive losing you, any of you*, he had whispered into the quiet of his empty apartment, voice whistling through unopened window-blinds and abandoned door-chimes, *I don’t think I could live through it*)

Technoblade squeezed his eyes shut. “Let me try.”

And so they sat like that, a tragedy and his chorus: twins. Techno held his brother as he cried and Wilbur did not stop until his pain had run dry, tears slowly trickling into nothing and snot sticky on the soft skin of the back of his hand from wiping it away. They did not speak, did nothing but blink owlishly as the traffic light continued to shift from red to green to yellow and back again; the morning sun was beginning to draw herself up from beneath the horizon, and above them the moon grew pale with listlessness.

It was the determined buzz of a phone that forced them apart, booming in the vacuum of their beat-up car. Wilbur sighed as he drew himself from Techno's hold, reaching for his cell with a wane smile that pinched his eyes. For the first time Techno was able to see the age on his twin's face: there was dullness there, in his posture, in the way his calloused hands refused to hold steady, how his gaze always seemed slightly clouded with worry. For the first time he could see the toll that all those years had taken on him, all those years of being a stand-in father for a child without a mother, being separate from his other half, being the one who left second.

(Technoblade wondered if his forehead carried the same worry-lines, if his mouth set with the same grim frown when he thought no one was watching. He wondered, not for the first time, if his twin was his mirror)

"*Tubbo?*" His brother's alarmed voice snapped him out of his reverie, sending him lurching forward as he struggled to hear the static of the teenager's voice on the other end of the line. Noticing his eagerness, Wilbur quickly put the call on speaker. "Wait, wait, slow down. Explain, please."

The boy's voice crackled to life, a canon shot: "Hurry up! Get Pinky and fucking hit the gas! We found him! We know where he is—"

"*Where?* Where is he?" Techno snatched the phone away from his brother just as Wilbur began buckling himself in, a jolt in his hands as he buckled himself in and turned the key. The engine roared. "Use words, Turbo."

"Okay, first of all, fuck you," a second voice—Randy, or something—chimed in, sounding far too anxious to be taken seriously, "second: he's at the canyon. Right off the freeway—Tubbo will text you the location he got from Dream."

Techno startled at the mention of Wilbur's old rival and glanced at the former theater-major. In the driver's seat, Wilbur bit his lower lip, fingers tapping a nervous rhythm on the wheel. He glanced back at Techno, giving him a sharp nod—whatever was going on, they'd better sort it out quick. Nothing good came when Dream was involved. The younger twin huffed, "got it. Thank you. We will see you there."

"You better not fuck this up, alright?" Tubbo's voice was all steel, dangerous, cutting. "If you do, if you hurt Tommy more than your sorry asses already have, I will make sure no one finds your bodies, got it?"

Wilbur swallowed deep. "Noted, thank you."

"I swear to God—"

“Tubbo, I think they’ve understood your point. Listen, just…be careful, please. We’ve seen Tommy after…after something like this before, okay? It’s never easy. Don’t make it about yourselves.”

“We won’t,” Techno hoped he sounded more assuring than worried, “we—we just want to find him. We just want to make sure he’s okay.”

There was a beat, where Techno thought that maybe he had said something wrong, that he would set the small one on another angry rant, before Tubbo let out a begrudging: “Alright. Drive safe.”

“You too. Bye.” Techno ended the call. Wilbur adjusted the rearview mirror. The engine gave a furious purr as the older twin pressed the gas-pedal, the car inching forward and back onto the road.

Wilbur loosed an anxious breath as they addled up to the traffic light. “Ready?”

Techno offered a weary smile. “Can you try not to get any more traffic tickets?”

His twin snorted, rolling his neck as he revved the car’s engine. His fingers flexed on the wheel, and she shot Techno a sly smile: “I make no promises.”

They rushed forward; bats out of hell.

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His first funeral had been his mothers and his second his father’s. Dream had not wanted to attend the latter—his father had been a cruel man that had drunk himself to death, Dream would spare no sympathies—but Puffy had urged him to at least make an appearance. So he donned a black button-up and a pair of too-stiff slacks and made his way to the local church on a Tuesday afternoon to pay his respects. Or lack thereof.

It was everything he had expected: an empty nave with a threadbare funeral wreath propped on a black coffin. His father had no friends, no family. Dream and the catholic priest who organized the event were the only ones to see the monster laid into the earth.

Dream had spat on his grave when the other man left. The soil had still been dark and fresh.

He knew his mother’s had been much different, though he couldn’t think of it now; he was sure there had been tears and bright, colorful flowers clutched in every mourner’s hands. His mother had liked color, had liked the warm yellows of spring flowers and their bright green stems, the shifting blues and greens of shattered bottles upon the shoreline. *Colorful*, is how he liked to remember her, even as her face grew blurry with each passing year, *colorful and a maker of magic thread*. His mother was a woman of her hands: she was the best seamstress, best knitter, best crocheter on the block. After work she would cross-stitch at the kitchen table for hours, teaching him the different knots, how each cotton thread could create new worlds; their house had been abound with her magic, from knitted baby-blankets to table dollies for the newly-wed neighbors, there was always a universe being spun. His mother’s webs had been the first poem he had known.

But she died when he was ten. Then came all the skipped classes and alcohol and bruises under his shirt and *blah blah blah*. Boring! Yes it was very tragic, probably scarred him for life (*oh it most certainly did*, George would snark), but Dream was not one to linger on what had come behind him. The past was something meant for poems and late night tears on a pillow; Puffy liked to tell him that hurt wasn't just a thing of art, that it had to be felt and talked about and put to bed, but he would rather not spend hours wondering after the what-could-have-beens of his childhood.

So he wrote. It was the only thing that came natural to him. He wrote as if the world would end once he picked up his pen, as if this act of creation was the only thing keeping the universe's fibers from collapsing under the weight of what goes unspoken. He wrote, and told himself it was to be able to go to bed at night and rest easy. A lie. He stood on rooftops and tried to organize oxygen into stanzas and line breaks. He published poems and told stories and attended workshops, a bashful smile each time they gave him praise.

*How do you do it?*, they would ask, *how do you churn out so much work, good work, in such limited limited time?*

In fifteen minutes he could pen an ode, in thirty Homer's *Odyssey*. It took someone seven seconds to hit the ground from the roof of his apartment complex.

*I just keep writing, don't stop moving my pen*, he'd shrug, eyes determinedly light and tone pleasant, *just keep going until time is called. I don't care what words are on the page, I just write whatever comes to my fingertips.*

(He did not know how to tell them it was the fear that drove his hands to make, that one day he would wake to find them trembling and sliced open, red palms faced towards the yellow-light of his ceiling fan and dripping onto the hardwood floor. He did not tell them that after her funeral, he had tore through his mother's closet looking for her sewing supplies. *Just one thing*, he had begged the empty bedroom, his empty apartment as he sat with a cookie-tin of needles in his lap, *just one thing to show me we're not gone forever*)

His mother had once told him his eyes were like the ocean under a thunder storm; he was afraid that they would become sea-glass.

So he wrote fast and did not think of upturned soil until the lights went out. He knew that he was running—he wasn't an idiot—but he knew what happened to poets who stopped. He had seen Puffy's worry, how her face would twist into something sorrowful when she thought he wasn't looking. Dream knew his team-mates saw him as a ticking time-bomb; they always had. Ponk always looked askance, their laughter just a touch muted as if anything too loud would shatter him, and Foolish's gaze never quite met his. *Careful*, he knew they whispered in hallways and after-practice car-rides, *careful not to pull the trigger. Careful not to step on the trip-wire.*

The only one who had never looked at him like he was destruction packed into a body had long left the team—who was to say his replacement would be any different from the others?

So when Tommy first arrived at practice, long and thin with a nose he hadn't grown into quite yet, Dream hadn't bothered with the pleasantries. He was tired of feeling like a predator

amongst sheep, tired of being the star on a team that everyone knew had already blown itself out to death. And okay, yeah, maybe he got a kick out of watching the teen flounder around him, but he had no intentions of making friends. He already had all he needed—an apartment that never smelt of liquor, two best friends, Puffy, and an adorable great dane named Spirit (that the landlord definitely did *not* know about, and he would keep it that way)—what difference could a baby poet make?

A lot, apparently, as he spent nights on long phone-calls, tossing possibilities back and forth. Poetry, fears and hopes; him and Tommy just *clicked*, two magnets brought together at the right pole. Tommy looked at Dream and didn't see someone to be feared: he saw someone to be challenged. *You're not going to make me look like an idiot*, the boy had said the first evening they had worked on that poem, two tailors afraid of dipping their thread into each other's cross-stitchings, *I know you think I'm...an amateur, but I refuse to let you make me feel stupid*.

Dream had flashed his teeth, *I wouldn't have it any other way, kid*.

Everyone on the team knew that Tommy reminded Dream of himself, it didn't take a rocket scientist to connect the dots: two kids from a bad situation who found a lifeline in slam. He could see his reflection in Tommy's eyes, how they were determinedly sharp as if fighting off whatever memories threatened to cloud them, how he hugged his arms close to his chest, how he was too quick to laugh. Tommy was walking the trail Dream had blazed for him, and it made the older poet want to punch a hole into a wall.

And then there was the open mic; a lost brother in the audience; parking-lot arguments and fast cars; a missed phone-call, then two, then five, then twelve; a freeway blurring past at the speed of light. Dream watched the skyscrapers, a midnight gleam under a solitary moon as they fell away to hillsides.

And then there was a canyon, its deep echo alight with fireworks fizzling into the morning sky.

A last resort. If he was religious, he might have prayed right about now.

A purple firework twisted itself into a resounding boom of color, and Dream let out a low whistle. He felt an easy smile stretch across his face, the corners of his mouth twitching as he tried to quell his rising anxiety—they had left Tommy up there with Sam, something that Dream had vehemently argued against. *Not that I don't trust Sam, but I think that I probably know what's going on in that kid's head better than either of you guys*, he'd crossed his arms, eyebrow quirkling, *if there's anyone who can talk him out of his spiral, it's someone who's been there before*.

There had been an exchange of awkward glances, before Puffy had finally broken under Dream's glare and admitted: *Dream, we're trying to make sure you don't follow him on that spiral. We don't want you to go...there, again*.

And yeah, okay, that made sense. Didn't mean he had to be happy about it though.

So Dream stood there, begrudgingly admiring the fireworks above them. He allowed an appreciative hum as three pink ones exploded peonies in the sky. “I’m not going to lie, Puffs, this is one hell of a light show. You really out did yourself.”

Next to him Puffy let out a weak chuckle, gnawing anxiously on the bottom of her lip as she watched the last of the fireworks cascade above them. She had been a for the fifteen minutes it took for Sam to give them the green-light, fretting over everything outside of her control (*what if the wind blows them off course? We could start a brush fire, oh gosh, what if we do start one? I can’t let Tommy go to jail!*) and her nerves hadn’t settled even as the fireworks went off without a hitch. “Thanks, I’m not sure—”

“Ayo, I’m the one who should be getting credit here!” A disgruntled voice sounded from behind them, and Dream stifled a long-suffering sigh tinged with fondness. Turning, he met the white-cloud eye of none other than Quackity Nevadas, a sharp grin glittering on the man’s face. It had been a year-or-so since he had last seen him, and it showed in the way Quackity carried himself: long gone was a curved spine and casual elbows into a friend’s side, replaced with shoulders drawn back and chest pushed forward.

But still, it was Quackity, and mischief danced along the breeze. Dream couldn’t help to return a smile back, even as Quackity began to mutter with a false bitterness, “honestly, it’s like I left for a year and suddenly no one respects the hard work I put in. These illegal fireworks aren’t free, you know. I *will* be sending an invoice.”

“Yeah, yeah, my bad.” Dream gave Quackity’s back a hearty slap, laughing as the shorter man stumbled. Quackity sent him a scathing glare out of his working eye. “Next time I will sing your praises to the heavens, O Great One. Still, good job on the fireworks—how did you even get this stuff?”

He sniffed, looking at his cracked fingernails with practiced nonchalance, but couldn’t keep the smugness out of his voice: “A magician doesn’t reveal his secrets, you know this Dream. Let’s just say I’ve had some cards up my sleeve for a while.”

“Oh? A family recipe then?” Dream couldn’t help the grin splitting his face at the thought of Quackity’s aunt or grandfather teaching him how to use gunpowder at the kitchen table. “How does Momma Q feel about you using the old recipe to fuel Puffy’s theatrics?”

At that, the warm familiarity was wiped clean off Quackity’s face. What had once been playful turned sour in the air between them, and Quackity gave an award shrug, craning his head to stare at the fireworks above them. “Ah, well, it was Sapnap’s recipe. We...you know.”

“Oh,” Dream spluttered, “oh, yeah, right. Right. Uh, sorry. Sorry.”

“Don’t even worry about it, man. We’ve been...*done*, for like a year and a half now. It’s—look, you don’t have to pretend to be friendly with me because we were on a team back in the day. I get that Sapnap is your best friend.” His words were weary, as if he had said this a hundred times before. Dream supposed he must have—their circle may not have been big, but word traveled fast and by the time Dream had been told, he was sure that even Puffy’s great-aunt had known. Anyhow, all of Sapnap’s friends had been Quackity’s too, and after the



break-up he must have had to go around making amends. Dream cringed internally, that had been the worst few months *ever*—Sapnap didn't stop crying for *weeks*. *Christ, we were making daily ice cream runs.*

"I'm not pretending," he responded after an awkward few seconds, glancing over at Puffy for help only to find the captain immersed in whatever was on her phone. He suppressed a defeated sigh—*great, we're opening this can of worms now. Good going, idiot.* Dream scratched at the hints of stubble at his jaw, trying to keep his voice even, "look, I know that the terms you, Sap, and Karl ended on weren't...the best, but I'm not pretending to like you. Like, yeah, I'm gonna prioritize Sapnap and talk shit on you when he's had too much wine, but I'm still your—"

He was interrupted by a cheery *ding!* from his phone (the relief washing over him was indescribable, he hated heart-to-hearts), and he offered Quackity an apologetic smile as he fumbled for it in his coat-pocket. Upon opening the text, he felt the color drain from his face:

*805-XXX-XXXX: hi there, this is tommy's friend tubbo. don't ask how i got ur number, u won't like the answer - he's currently missing rn i was hoping u would know where he is. if u do and u r not telling me i will call the cops and make your life a LIVING HELL. thank u*

A blink. "Who the fuck? Who the fuck names their child Tubbo?"

"What? Did you say Tubbo?" Puffy chimed in, looking away from her phone with wide-eyed concern. "Like, Tommy's Tubbo?"

"Seems like it, he sent me, uh, a very threatening message. Wants to know where Tommy is." His thumbs hesitated over the keyboard; he didn't want to make Tommy have to interact with his friend when he was at such a low place, didn't want to expose Tubbo to that either, but wouldn't it be cruel to lie? If it had been George or Sapnap missing, he would want to know immediately. He sent a pleading look towards Puffy as his phone continued to blow up with furious messages: "What do I say?"

"Christ, this kid couldn't have worse timing. Just...tell him he's safe with us. Don't give any details beyond that he's okay. Well, at least, okay physically." Puffy ran a hand through her knotted hair, wincing as the tangles got caught in the thin skin between her fingers. "Make sure not to freak him out, we don't need the state department coming out here. Especially not with so much contraband."

"You make it sound like we're smuggling cocaine, not illegal fireworks." Quackity snorted, stuffing his hands into the pocket of his hoodie. "But yeah, it would be best that we didn't get caught out here. How long are you guys planning on staying anyways?"

"Until Sam lets us know that Tommy's ready to see us. It might be a while depending on... yeah." Dream could tell that Puffy was trying to remain steady, heard it in the way her voice was just a pitch too high, words just a tad too clipped—it made him nervous. Puffy was the

team's steady rock, the commander of the ship that kept them all afloat. Sure, she was a hell of a worry-wart, but she always seemed to have everything in control. He hadn't seen her like this in a long time. Not since that first night.

(A darkened ally, back against the cool metal of a trashcan, lip split. A shadow appears, casts over his bruised face as a woman stands in a doorway. She is not much older than him, but it is the first hug that reminds him of his mother in six years. He cries that night when she helps him wash the blood out of his hair. Later he hears her gasp through a panic attack from the other side of a bedroom door)

Dream tried to offer her a kind smile, but he knew it looked strained; he wasn't equipped for reassurance, not in the way Puffy was. He wasn't a man of soft touches and gentle eyes—he had grown up in a house of TV static and shattered glass, knew how to get blood out of carpets and lock the bathroom door when beer-bottles snapped open after midnight. The most he could do was shift closer to her, left hand limp from where it hung at his side—an offering. As if to say *if you need you can reach for me. I'm here. Breathe. I'm here.*

Puffy heaved a sigh, worried fingers making their way through her knotted hair. Her eyes flickered with something uncertain, a captain at the helm of a sinking ship—she would not watch her crew drown, this Dream knew, but he was afraid that she would follow the cracking mast and planks to the bottom of the sea.

*(I will not watch you destroy yourself, she had told him once, nothing but nineteen and still floundering with newly-minted adulthood, I will not allow you to ruin what you have created for yourself. You idiot—you're not alone anymore)*

Dream's throat suddenly felt tight, and he struggled to swallow. He was not afraid of came after the fireworks ended, of the sun's full rise, of when the clouds rolled away. He was not afraid of the steep cliff-side and beckoning rooftops, the echo of a dark kitchen and roommates still warm with sleep. He was not afraid to go home after this—he was afraid of the morning after, when it would be just Puffy alone in an empty apartment, no sixteen year old leant against the door to hear her sharpened breath.

"I wish we could see what's going on up there. I just...*God*," Puffy huffed, chewing her bottom lip. There was a heartbeat of silence, where all that could be heard was the hiss of sparks above them. When she next spoke, it was with a steeled conviction, and Dream was reminded why Puffy had been chosen to lead their team, "Don't let Tubbo come here. We can't. I'm not sure how it's going up there with Sam, and I don't...I don't want to risk tipping Tommy back over the edge again."

He nodded, moving to execute the command. "Got it, I'll just message him something generic but reassuring. He's a kid, what could he possibly do—"

A ding:

*805-XXX-XXXX: nvm, got ur location. U should invest in a vpn or sumn, king.*

Dream stared at his screen, eyes flat. The exasperation building in his throat made him want to scream. Or cry. “Please don’t tell me that a teenager just hacked into my phone.”

Quackity gave a snicker—oh yeah, Dream was definitely going to scream.

“From what Tommy told me of Tubbo, that sounds like something he would do.” Puffy rubbed at her eyes with the heel of her hand, trying to blink away the dark circles from exhaustion. “Look, we’ll worry about that later, let’s just get ready for whenever Sam needs us. Quackity, how much longer until the fireworks end?”

Quackity pulled out his phone to check the time, clucking his tongue amicably. “If we started about fifteen minutes ago it should be over in...eh, give it about another three minutes. I might as well hit the road—got people to see, shit to do. Y’know how it is.”

“Right,” Puffy sighed, a tense smile making its way to her face, “thank you for this Quackity, seriously. I know that we didn’t part on great terms but...this means a lot, really. I owe you one.”

Quackity shrugged, a crossing his arms with a forced nonchalance. He fiddled with his jacket sleeve, apparently off-put from the sincerity dripping from Puffy’s words. It struck Dream then that he hadn’t checked in on the poet in...gosh, a year? After the break-up, the arguments and unspoken poems, had anyone even spoken to Quackity? He knew Puffy had sent a text or two, but had Ponk? Foolish? Guilt prickled in his stomach, biting and incessant. He resolved to call the man as soon as this whole shit-show had blown over. Quackity’s dark eyes glittered something fierce as he spoke: “It might have been a while but...I’m still here to help, when you guys need. We might not be a...*team*, anymore, but I’m always there when you need to call in a favor. It’s the least I can do, after everything.”

*We’re still family*, he seemed to say, *I will have your back when it counts. I will be there.*

Family. It was still a novel word after all these years—an unconditional thing, of feathers and poetry practices, of yellow flowers pressed into the pages of a favorite book, of howling laughter and last-minute sleepovers. *Family*, Quackity fell short of saying, and Dream felt the word sink its teeth into his heart. Because it was Puffy, it was Tommy and Ponk and Quackity an Sapnap and George and Foolish and Karl—it was the spool of thread he kept in the storage closet, next to the sewing pins and stray needles. Family: it was a thing he had been reaching for, what he had been chasing like a hound on the scent of blood. A family, what he had prayed for, as ten year-old hiding under his bed with a pillow clutched to his chest, as sixteen year-old behind a coffeeshop.

“Of course. Thank you, again.” Dream offered a hand, and Quackity clasped it firmly in his, both men pulling forward to clap each other on the back. An olive branch. “We’ll be seeing you around, right?”

“Oh, yeah, you can be sure of that.” Quackity said as he pulled away, a knowing smirk pulling at his lips. “You’re not getting rid of me that easy, guys. I have a few surprises in store.”

Puffy laughed, shaking her head. She took a step towards the poet, hands reaching, to pull him into a hug—she had done it countless times, wrapped her arms around her teammates, given their shoulders a tender squeeze. It was an old routine, one of post-show celebrations and ended practices, one that Quackity met with reluctance and a stiff-spine. Dream couldn't help but snort at how the man's eyes crinkled at the corners, a grimace overtaking his face as he gave Puffy an awkward pat between her shoulder blades. Quackity was never one for hugs, and he looked absolutely *miserable*... Dream was loving every second of it. "Well, we'll be glad to see it. Take care, Quackity."

"Yeah, yeah, okay see you losers later." Quackity huffed, disentangling himself from Puffy's hold, much to Dream's bubbling laughter. He tugged at the hem of his jacket, popped his collar, as if a bird puffing his feathers with an exaggerated annoyance. "Don't forget! I'm sending you a Venmo after this!"

"Okay, get going!" Dream waved him off as he began to walk away, smothering a laugh. *I can't believe I missed this guy*, he couldn't help but snark in his head, cheeks stinging with the lingering of a smile, *too bad that fucker had to leave the team. Annnnd that's why I told Sap not to date within the friend group.*

Quackity didn't even turn as he gave Dream the middle finger, nose high in the air. The night air rustled the dirt he kicked up in his wake, leaving a thundercloud of reddened dust as the sun's whitened glare cast down upon them. Next to him, Puffy gave Quackity's retreating back a little wave—they would not say goodbye, not really. Instead, as poets often do, they would promise: *we will see each other again.*

Above, the final firework launched into the sky, a songbird's whistle—Dream did not know what they would do once it shattered, once this momentary breath had been exhaled. Would Tommy be alright? What would be left of their team, this little patchwork family they had so lovingly cultivated with each slip of thread through discarded fabric?

The back of Puffy's knuckles brushed against his, and he twined their fingers together without thinking. How many times had they been like this, a captain and her first-mate, clutching each other's hands like a life-line? How many times had they gazed at the stars as they swept themselves to bed, wondering what would come after the night? Here they were, two lost voyagers who had fashioned themselves into poets, who had labored over language and tried to find something lovable in the words they clenched between their teeth.

He gripped Puffy's hand so tight his knuckles whitened, the bone pressing against the thin skin. He did not speak as his hand shook in hers, as he felt the muscles cramp and veins throb as if to scream, *I'm afraid.*

Because there were two brothers up on that cliff; a pair of arms keeping a boy from breaking apart, a ribcage protecting a heart from being crushed under the weight of a world seem bent on turning caving him in, turning him into misplaced verses and unfinished notebooks. Because there was a boy on that cliff, who had been just a boy just like he had—just a boy, who had learned to hide his suicide notes in poems and fears under bedcovers. There were two brothers on that cliff, and Dream was afraid.

(Because they were family, God they were *family*, and he was terrified of what would happen if he were to ever let them go)

So they watched, silent. Two pairs of lungs flooding with stiff-morning air in unison, holding, waiting, as the firework unwound above them.

(*You are not alone anymore*, Puffy had said, a fire in her eyes that had not dimmed since she was nineteen. Dream had stood on a rooftop, eyes pinned on the moon's shadowed face, ignoring the streetlights blinking yellowed fluorescence below him. She reached for his hand —)

Red, a wave crashing on the shore. A sigh.

He squeezed Puffy's hand; *I know*.

She squeezed back.

## Chapter End Notes

\*chants\* quackity, quackity, quackity!

really, that part was just self indulgent for me, and i cant wait for yall to see the C plot which is just him being a menace.

also we got a new poem! i've had that one in the works for a while, so glad i finally get to reveal it!

i need you guys to know that i hate this chapter with my entire being and edited it at 3:30 am after reading about abraham lincoln for 12 hours so i am...not at the top of my game. next chapter will be much better i can assure you.

as always leave me poetry recs if you have them, and also any song recs! currently in the business of diversifying my music taste! see you next time (which honestly might not be until late May because I have finals!)

# **“I don’t remember/what it was like when my lungs/arrived under water[...]I just/know what it feels like to be a new/parent.”**

## Chapter Notes

Title from “A Doctor Tells Us It’s Not a Life or Death Situation” by Marcus Amaker.  
Lovely poem!

Hahahah soooooo, did you miss me? Sorry for taking so long to update - really, there is no excuse other than I was really struggling with how to make this chapter work, and how to fit in everything I wanted to fit and finally came up with the solution to just split it into two parts! So sorry, this one might be a bit dull (it's mostly set up and me talking about birds), but I promise next chapter has all the goodies!

Again, sorry for taking so long! it's currently 1:30am right now before sophomore year move in for college so I'm a bit discombobulated and should be better at apologizing, but thank you for reading and continuing to leave such lovely messages. They really got me through some rough times this summer!

TWs: mentions of anxiety/depression, illness/death, deadbeat dads, coming out and implied trauma related to that, funerals, mentions of alcohol, implied thoughts of self harm, and gratuitous cursing. Stay safe as always, and without further ado here his chapter 12!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

He didn’t know when the it first started, but all he knew was that it would not leave him. It followed him to work, to the doctors office and back to his front door. He looked into mirrors in the mornings and found worry-lines; he stayed up double checking the locks on doors and windows; prayed; woke to find cricks in his spine and shaking hands; triple checked the windows and doors and baby-proofed cabinets; tried to remember childhood prayers; assure that everything that was possibly in his control would remain so. There would be no accidents, he promised himself, no avoidable tragedies. This, at least, he could do.

(But he did not go a day without the fear that plagued him, that ran its fingers across his scalp and said, *one day you will fail. One day someone will get hurt, and all of this will come crashing down on your head. Look: grey hairs*)

So he worked and worried and went to bed each night dreading the next. He grit his teeth at his desk as he emailed the middle-man and software engineers and clients—*Hope this email finds you well, Warm Regards*—and took his lunch break in the office. He did not speak to his coworkers outside of necessity or stilted coffee-machine niceties; he combed through baby-sitter referrals and reviews of daycares. He did not attend Christmas or Halloween work parties, and his supervisor was concerned that he was struggling to find community at the

company. He argued that filling twin stockings post-bedtime or hemming the bottoms of a last-minute Buzz Lightyear costume sapped a lot of his social battery.

*(Depression and a generalized anxiety disorder, the doctors had told him, back when he had still worn black and startled awake at night to feel a horrendous pressure on his chest, the stress of it all has finally caught up to you. It's like...Pac-Man. You spend so much time outrunning the ghosts, and if you don't get a power-up, they might catch up before you can beat them.)*

(He tried not to show on his face how stupid he thought that allegory sounded)

But when it was dark, when he had put the boys to bed and finished preparing baby bottles for the next morning, he thought of what came Before. The fear had not been as strong then, when there had been someone who had slept in the spot beside his, who had brought his whitened knuckles to their lips and pressed their thumbs into his shoulder blades on evenings his back ached. It was nights he remembered the warmth of her fingertips that he shut his bedroom door tight, praying that his children wouldn't hear the cries he smothered with a palm to his mouth.

He prayed a lot, nowadays. When the prayers didn't work he took the meds the doctor gave him.

(And when those didn't work anymore—when he had locked himself in the bathroom because it was the only place he could escape the two pairs of eyes gawking up at him, always crying and pleading, the only room in the house that wasn't heavy with memories of *her*—he went back to praying. That, at the least, he could do)

So he worked and worried and slept, created a routine out of the grief threatening to submerge him. When Wilbur had his first depressive episode he dragged him to the best child psychologist in the city; when Technoblade suddenly found himself unable to speak he badgered the neurologists for a CAT scan; when Tommy wouldn't stop crying and wouldn't eat and couldn't sleep, he sighed, heated a pre-prepared baby bottle, and rocked him into silence.

*(There are no perfect parents, the instructor had said at the Mommy-and-Me classes he was forced to attend by his doctor after Tommy's birth, where he sat awkwardly in a circle of first-time mothers that sent him pitying glances when they thought he wasn't looking, that shouldn't be your goal. You just need to be good enough.)*

*(Bullshit, had been his first thought, immediately followed by, fuck, did I tell the sitter that Techno's comfort blanket was in the wash?)*

But he was still scared. God, he was always scared.

Scared that he would miss one of the twin's parent-teacher conferences, scared that Techno was being bullied on the blacktop or that Wilbur was too shy to tell the teacher his accommodations, that at Tommy's next check-up the pediatrician would suck her teeth and shake her head, *bad news*. Scared of *that* call, the one that came unannounced in the early

hours of the morning, that left him with shaking hands and collapsed knees, wet cheeks on the tiled floor of his kitchen—

*Hello? This is a receptionist at St. Joseph's hospital...*

*I'm sorry, it's your sons...*

*Dad, help, please, I think I got myself into trouble...*

—scared that he would wake to an empty house, empty beds. He had heard all the horror stories from soap operas and Lifetime movies: it is the day that your child *really* needs you that you are not there. You could be there for senior prom and kindergarten piano recitals, first heart breaks and little-league baseball games and scraped knees and *none* of it would matter. There would still be the poorly-hidden glares and unspoken question of *why?*

*Why weren't you there, why didn't you care? Why didn't you come find me?*

(And how could any parent answer that—*why*. Why he had spent long nights on bathroom floors when the boys rushed to his bedroom after a nightmare; why he had worked overtime even on evenings no baby sitter was available; why he didn't follow Wilbur out the house after a screaming match or Technoblade when he ran away to Massachusetts; why he had just sat patiently and *waited*)

Because there would be a day when his boys needed him, *really needed him*, and he would be ready. If not now, then.

The alarm clock shrieked in his ear as he darted awake, pushing himself onto his elbows only to immediately groan as exhaustion plucked his sore muscles. *Holy fuckin' Christ*, he fumbled blindly for the SNOOZE button, heaving a sigh of relief as the endless ring ceased with a sharp *click*. He blinked once, twice, debated sleeping in, before he forced himself to swing his feet over the side of the bed and begin his day. He mindlessly plucked his phone from its charger, ambling to the attached bathroom as he went about the motions of waking up—he splashed cool water on his face, brushed his teeth and rinsed with mouth wash, and pretended to be surprised when he saw grey hairs streaking blonde. It was a mundane ritual, one he had fallen into eagerly as soon as his children were old enough to pack their lunches and get to the bus stop by themselves. He loved the slowness of his wake, how he hummed as he made his bed, how he lingered by the framed photo on his nightstand and brushed away overnight-dust with the soft pad of this thumb.

(This is what it must mean to get older, right? To reduce yourself to the simplicities, to watch kids leave the house and become a rhythmic thing: it was a routine he had waited patiently for hoping that he could retire to a sunny porch with two rocking chairs, every ideal printed on Hallmark cards and Fidelity commercials. That's all that he wanted)

(Right?)

*Thank fuck it's a Friday and I get off early*, he huffed a weary laugh as he reached for the phone sitting on his nightstand, *I couldn't stand a ten hour shift today, not this week.*



And God, what a week it had been. The boys' visit had thrown the household into a tail spin—after all, they hadn't left on the best terms when the twins moved away, and tension sat heavy in the house like grease at the bottom of a pan. Stubborn. He hadn't expected everything to be absolutely hunky-dory, of course not, and knew that there would be awkward moments: when Techno would forget where they used to store the laundry detergent and Wilbur would call the trunk the 'boot', and they'd all be overwhelmed with the suddenness of becoming strangers.

(And it wasn't like Tommy was making it any easier. The teen seemed hellbent on spending as much time outside of the house as possible or sulking in his bedroom, just out of reach)

He mindlessly scrolled through the barrage of notifications, more concerned about finding his work shoes than actually processing what was on the screen. It was always the same anyways: work email, work email, reminder to stop by the dry-cleaners on his way home from work, work email, missed call from Wilbur, work email, text from his boss, more emails...

Wait.

"Oh fuck."

Fuck indeed; bar the fact that Wilbur could just walk across the hall if he needed something urgent, Wilbur almost never called first. Never. For God's sake the last time he willingly picked up the phone was to drop a not-so-small bomb that he'd be visiting!

He chewed at his bottom lip, trying to ignore the growing pit at the bottom of his stomach. *Fuck*. He could feel the prickle of dread underneath the cracked skin of his palms, the tremors that would soon overtake them and leave them useless. And God how he hated it, the looming shadow of a cross threatening to burden him; the pale blue pills the doctor had shoved into his pockets, leaving him on the curbside of a too-known hospital; the fear that his knees would buckle; the look on ten year-old son's face when the therapist had explained to him what a panic attack was; the embarrassed explanation to relatives that *yeah, they prescribed me some stuff but I don't really need it, y'know?*

Generalized anxiety disorder they called it, and he hated how he forgot to breathe.

And now, looking at the glaring screen of his phone he could feel it settle heavy in his stomach; that call. That fucking call. He had gone twenty-five years waiting anxiously for his phone to ring, for the sky to crack, fall away and leave unavoidable Nothing in its wake—he had waited his children's whole life for that call, only to find he *fucking missed it*.

(*Why didn't you find me?* they would ask, eyes expectant like offered palms, and all he could do was tell them about the neat folds of his bedsheets)

Something taloned gripped his heart. No. This couldn't—it had to be fine. He was *fine*.

His feet took him to the unlit hallway without his permission, his bare feet cold against the worn wood as he shuffled forward. He did not feel the bite of the brass doorknob as he turned it, did not feel how his knuckles tightened as he pushed the door forward, forward—he was a

ghost as he had been so many times before, a man who had made a home outside of his body and the timber walls threatening to collapse.

The door to his son's room swung open. An empty bed.

When you become a parent you also become a thing of fear. You know the feeling of terror intimately; the moment before the water breaks; the first night back from the hospital when you can't sleep; the first day of preschool when the classroom lights are too bright and your baby's hands too small; the first time you let that hand go, and realize yours is too cold; second grade T-ball games and elementary school graduations and suddenly there's a college acceptance in the mail and a cardboard box of old clothes under your bed; when they get on a plane without you; when you pray; when they come home. Finally, they come home, and suddenly you realize you will never stop being scared. Because that is your boy with the worry lines and dark eyes, that's your baby with the forced smiles and orange pill bottles that rattle—that is your little stranger who you will never be able to leave behind.

So yes, he knew terror well, but he thought this time it would kill him.

Three empty beds; three rings of telephone static until his call was answered.

A voice cracking like a switch on the line: "Hello?"

"Hello, Wilbur," whispered Philza Watson, and outside the morning crows heralded the rising sun, "you have exactly twelve seconds to tell me where you are."

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Even after all these years, Sam still remembered his grandmother's smile.

It wasn't bright or blinding, not like how the poems or songs always praised, no where near perfect and straight like subway tiles or picket fences—her yellowed teeth crashed into one another, and her left canine had been chipped in a wrestling match with her brothers when she was ten. But when she laughed he could hear the ocean, and when she squeezed her eyes shut he could see vineyards in her wrinkles, and when she finally shook her head and settled down into a chuckle, he could see great evergreens reaching towards the sky. Never-ending.

She always felt that way to him: unlimited. *Your Bubbe is a woman of many words*, his mother used to say, with a soft sigh of fond exasperation, *she always has something to say, someone to teach. The day she runs out of talk is the day the world ends, believe me.*

And Sam couldn't imagine that, his Bubbe being resigned into silence. She was always puttering about, always singing old Barry Sisters' songs under her breath or shouting back at the radio-hosts from the kitchen. *Don't let them fool you, Sammy*, she'd huff, cheeks full with her own mirth, *anyone who spends that much time chattering and not asking any questions is full of it.*

Sam didn't point out the irony of her own statement, too young and eyes too wide with awe to see his grandmother as anything less than pure magic. Here was the woman who read him stories before bed, who could move mountains and then some, who made the best latkes on their block and talked shit on the neighbor Miriam's recipe; here was the woman who had

been the first in her family to graduate high school and college with only a few bucks and a chipped tooth to her name, who had married a dentist and had four kids, who had raised them alone after he passed in a car accident, who had clothed them and bathed them and put them through school without complaint.

(“Was it hard?” He had asked, back when he was freshly seventeen and just getting a glimpse at what adulthood, at what parenthood, really meant. Bubbe had just given him one of those smiles and said, “one day you will become a father, and realize that if parenting isn’t hard, you aren’t doing it right.”)

Here was the woman who had been there: for violin recitals and middle school graduations, who had calmed him down from a panic attack before his Bar Mitzvah when he was scared he would butcher the words, for when he came out at age nineteen and cried into her lap for forgiveness. There: when she had whispered a sigh and taken his face in her hands, when she had pressed a soft kiss to his brow bone and said, “Bubbeleh, there is no love of yours that could require an apology. Not to me.”

*(I want to write you into forever, he had wordlessly wept into her rough fingers then, I cannot stand the idea of waking up without you there. Please, don’t leave me Bubbe.)*

Her smile, that’s what he remembered after everything. After the doctor had given her a prognosis of seventeen months; after his mother’s legs had fallen away from underneath her at the kitchen sink as she sobbed, after he had sat shiva and let his stubble grow out for the first time; after the first day back to work where he cried on his lunch break; after Ponk had stood outside his apartment door with Tupperware and an anxious smile, saying *I didn’t know if casseroles were kosher so I just brought pie*; after their first kiss; after his mother finally remarried and she gripped his bicep tight as he walked her down the aisle; after he graduated college and his mother turned to him under a thunderstorm of grad-caps and whispered, *she would be so proud of you, baby*.

And it was her smile he thought of now, standing at the edge of a canyon with a boy falling apart in his arms.

Sam had seen many students break down—God, so many he thought he’d wake up one morning to find he had no more tears left to give—but it never got any easier. Teaching was a thankless job, people liked to say, but Sam couldn’t help but feel the opposite. People were always praising teachers for a job almost-done, patting him on the back for trying to reach out to the ‘problem child’ but failing anyway. ‘You did your best’; ‘not all kids can be saved’; ‘you have to focus on yourself sometimes’; ‘there’s always the ones in too deep’; all utter *bullshit*.

There was always *more*. More parent-teacher conferences, more homework extensions, more referrals to counselors and lunchtime talks—there was always more that had him up at night, staring at his ceiling wondering What If. What if he had seen it sooner, could scoop them into a warm hug and tell them *don’t worry it will be alright*, that he had their back? What if he could keep that promise?

*(What if, what if, Bubbe would probably scoff, what if you stoped moping and put those good braincells to use? Huh?)*

Sam had seen many students fall apart, had cried for them in the dim lighting of his apartment when he thought Ponk couldn't hear; he had offered consoling pats on the shoulders and given extensions ("No questions asked, never for my class"), had filed the report and made the phone calls and crossed his fingers, hoping.

God, he was always hoping—what a useless, feathered thing. It couldn't be much good now.

Because as the fireworks had collapsed into gunpowder so did the teenager watching them, right into Sam's arms. Tommy had latched onto Sam like he was drowning, chest shuddering with sobs, face pressed into the space just under Sam's collarbone as if trying to steal the air from his lungs. Sam hadn't known what to do but hold him close, rubbing circles into Tommy's back while whispering reassurances—*it's okay, let it out, no one can hurt you now, I'm so proud of you*—it all felt empty.

Because what could be said now? After Tommy had stood at the precipice of living and decided to speak in poems, after he had lit the fireworks and watched them implode, after he had chosen to pluck a new world from the soft tissue lying between his ribs and bear it. What could Sam possibly say to that, besides *I've got you*?

*(I love you, a voice that sounded too much like rosemary and seltzer crooned in his ear, I would give you a love without wings, one that will never fly away. I love you)*

Sam sighed heavily through his nose and clutched Tommy to his chest a bit tighter.

"I've got you," he whispered, over and over, "I've got you. Don't worry, I've got you." And for now, that would have to be enough.

Eventually Tommy's heaves quieted to sniffles, and sniffles to weak hums of breathing. He slowly loosened his grip on Sam's shirt with every shaken inhale, every deliberate exhale he eased from his lips. It must have been eternities by the time Tommy had finally pulled himself out of Sam's grasp, the cool air hanging between them a witness to the dyings and births of countless universes; Tommy rubbed self-consciously at his puffy eyes with the back of his hand, shooting Sam a bashful smile and he couldn't stop the swell of affection in rising in his chest. *That's my kid alright*, he fought a grin, *you're going to be just fine*.

"Hey," Sam greeted softly, squeezing Tommy's hand once, twice, "you feeling better?"

Tommy let out a watery chuckle. "Yeah, I'm...I'm okay. Feel like a truck just ran me over but...I think I'll be okay. I would absolutely kill for a nap right now, though."

Sam laughed, praying that it sounded light and easy as opposed to the crushing relief overwhelming him. God, this kid would be the death of him. "Well, you're going to have to wait 'till Puffy gives you the green light. I'm sure she will want to make sure you've eaten before you knock out."

"Fine, only if it's McDonalds. Having anything else post-break down is just pure blasphemy at this point," Tommy let out a contemplative hum, tugging the jacket closer around his middle, "last time, Tubbo got us a sixty-piece Chicken McNugget combo and we had an eating competition. Ranboo only got through twelve before they threw up."

Sam blinked. “Uh, okay, yes on the McDonalds but no on the projectile vomiting. If you get sick on fast food Puffy will have my head, plus Dream will never let you live it down.”

Tommy shrugged as if to say, ‘alright, fair enough,’ and stuffed his hands into the pockets of Sam’s jacket. He glanced upwards again, blue eyes exhausted and heavy with old tears as he took in the pink newness of the morning sky. For a moment neither spoke, Tommy content to stare at the thinned clouds and Sam content to just watch the young teen’s chest move up and down with breath. That was the aftermath of everything, after all: breathing.

So they stood, the early mist crisp as they bellied it in their lungs. And Sam would be a liar if he said he didn’t wish for that moment to last forever.

So they breathed, and then: “I’m ready.”

Sam tilted his head, admiring the red-tail hawks beginning to circle overhead. When he was about ten his mother had done what every good Jewish parent did and sent him to summer camp. She had hoped that he would gain a ‘strong sense of community,’ or perhaps meet some kids who could break through the thick walls he had built out of notebook paper and worn book spines—either way, he had been absolutely miserable the entire time, too afraid to socialize with the other kids beyond group activities. He constantly wrote home, begging his mother to drive sixty miles to pick him up early, and spent every free moment escaping into his top-bunk to hide away with a journal and a pen. He scribbled obsessively that summer and every summer after, writing stories about the little boys who grew to be teenagers sneaking cigarettes after lights-out, about the older campers who taught them circle dances, the same ones he would teach younger campers years later.

But most of all, he wrote about the hikes. How the trees felt like they reached upwards to infinity; how at night they could hear owls sing blues music to the fireflies twinkling just below the stars; how on the really hot days, where everyone just wanted to float listlessly in the lake, the hawks would circle relentlessly; he wrote about the forest, how it felt like a story without an ending.

And when he had come back and showed his mother all the poems and funny little comics he wrote, she had taken the notebook with a dimpled smile and said, “I knew you could do it.”

He hadn’t known what she had meant then, had been just so happy to be home with his bathtub and his Bubbe who filled his plate with all his favorites. But now, years after he had placed his stones on Bubbe’s grave and watched his mother find happiness with a husband miles away, he understood. Because now, looking at Tommy’s face turned towards the sun, he found himself thinking the same thing: *I knew you’d be okay.*

(Once, long ago, when he had asked his grandmother if it was hard to raise children, to give yourself over completely and unwaveringly to these little pieces of yourself you watched grow, she had only laughed. “One day you will be a father,” she had told him, knowing then he would not know she that meant *one day, you will realize you found something worth finishing your story for*)

Above him the hawks shrieked, and they were so far up their wings looked like browned leaves falling from the tallest tree. Sam smiled. “Okay, let’s go. I’m sure there’s some folks

down that hill who are dying to say hello.”

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The new world begins as the first one ends: with a video game cartridge.

After Techno had left for college and before Wilbur had transferred to a UK university, Tommy had been gifted one of the twins’ old Nintendo DS for his birthday. Phil hadn’t bothered to wrap it, just handed him a black rectangle with the white streaks of freshly-scraped scissors with a weary smile and quiet *Happy birthday, kiddo*. There had been no fanfare, no frosted cake with nine proud candles or out-of-tune song lead by Wilbur, but Tommy had grinned brightly anyway. He didn’t care that the hinge holding the screen upright would go slack if he pressed a button too hard, that the stylus had been long-lost or that he had to beg Techno to get him a replacement—the DS was his escape. A portal into a world where he had unlimited re-dos, could save and start over as much as he wanted. His hearts could dwindle, his health could fall to zero and he could lose everything he had painstakingly worked to keep, but he could always try again.

(Sometimes that was all he ever wanted; when Wilbur’s voice would ricochet bullet off the walls and Techno’s would seemingly disappear, he would huddle beneath his bedsheets and pray to be sent back. To whatever had come before all doors did was slam shut)

That DS was his entire world, and it shattered sophomore year.

Tommy didn’t have many friends in middle school or elementary (hell, he didn’t even have friends in pre-K when he spent all his time in the sandbox) and his lack of experience socializing with his peers made him a little more than nervous for his freshman year. This was supposed to be it, what all the movies dubbed the ‘best-and-worst time of your life’—these four years were meant for creating his sense of self or whatever, for him to look in the mirror and say *I know who I am now*. Sure, Techno would call him melodramatic and Wilbur would say not to believe everything he saw on TV, but Tommy knew this was a turning point. Here he was, bright-eyed with a smile full of braces, ready to stumble upon adulthood like any fourteen year-old.

Per his usual luck, his first month of school was absolute dog-shit.

Not only did he have absolutely zero friends—apparently, rambling about your favorite installment in the Resident Evil franchise did very little for your street cred—but he was almost failing every class. At first he tried to tell himself that it was too early in the semester to fuss about low grades, and second that hey, maybe this was just growing pains and he would find his footing eventually. But as the weeks passed and each exam was returned with red Xs littering his pencil marks, he knew there was no use in pretending. He was just unteachable.

So he went back to what he knew: three hearts, GAME OVERs, and TRY AGAIN? A world of small reassurances, where Link would always wake up in Koroko Village, Mario would load in pixel by pixel as Princess Peach was carried away, and Tommy would get another chance. Because this couldn’t be it, long nights spent over meaningless busy work until his eyes crossed, dinners alone at a kitchen table, his only company the hum of electricity in the

walls empty of photographs. There had to be more to his life than this, more to *him*, than missing brothers and a father made of ghosts.

(There was a memory he was always chasing, just out of reach. He was little, really little, and sitting in someone's lap; he didn't know who, but he liked to think it was his father's. He liked to think that for a moment, as those warm harms held him close to someone's heart beat, he was something precious)

But then there was Tubbo. Tubbo who was as brilliant as he was kind, who was stomach-achingly hilarious, who was patient, so, so patient with Tommy; Tubbo who had refused to look Tommy in the eye as he explained his dyslexia, who was afraid of the dark and nothing else, who had gripped Tommy's hand tight, unrelenting, the first time Tommy spoke of his mother.

(And he had been there, the first time Tommy had made a throw-away joke about suicide. There is no pretty way to explain that, the way Tubbo's chest seemed to inflate with lungfuls of fear then fall away, the way he had bit his bottom lip. Thinking—Tubbo was always thinking. And for the first time, Tommy could care less about what)

(That night, Tommy was afraid to sleep without a light)

There was Tubbo, and for a while, that was enough. For a while, the world wasn't bound to a screen.

But then there was Ranboo, and with them came missing assignments and glass bottles hidden under his bed. At first Tommy tried not to be jealous and give Tubbo the space to make new friends, but Ranboo was just...*good*. He was good in all the ways Tommy wasn't: they excelled at their classes, never needing Tubbo to step in and help them with basic math or science, they could keep up with Tubbo's humor in ways that Tommy couldn't, and when they spoke it was as if the world stopped and listened. For all of Ranboo's shyness and humility (and God wasn't that annoying? The fucker just had to be humble too), everyone knew that Ranboo was just as smart as Tubbo—the two were a pair, a perfect match. Tommy knew it the first time that Ranboo had sat down at that lunch table: Tubbo and Ranboo, Ranboo and Tubbo. They just clicked.

("Rule of threes," Mr. Sam used to repeat over and over in Honors Literature, "writers love the rule of threes. Humans have three minutes to live without oxygen, three days without water, and three weeks without sustenance. It's the special number, the breaking point. It's witching hour—it's at three that things begin to unravel.")

Tommy didn't fit. Of course: what a pitiful pattern.

So he drank and played video games and could only sleep when the sun was out. His teachers tutted about his wasted potential; Ranboo sent him half-assed glares and ignored his texts in the group chat; Tubbo sighed, and told him to reach out if he 'ever felt down'; his father said nothing.

And Tommy was exhausted. That was the core of it, really—he was just...*too tired*. Every blink, every step, felt like it was draining the life out of him. No matter how much he slept,

no matter how many energy drinks he threw back or how many times he pinched himself awake during class, his exhaustion was suffocating. It weighed heavy on his bones, seeped into its marrow: he was just *tired*, and there was nothing to do about it.

“You don’t look well,” Mr. Sam had told him one afternoon, voice forcibly light as he pushed around his salad with his fork, “are you sick? I can write you a note for the health office.”

This had become their routine after his and Tubbo’s last fight: Tommy would stay behind as everyone packed up and rushed out for lunch, stalling by his desk as he waited for the room to empty before Mr. Sam would pull out an extra Jersey Mike’s sandwich and toss it to him. At first, Tommy had tried refusing—he couldn’t possibly ask Mr. Sam to spend money on him, to feed him like some stray—but the man had just shook his head and said *Tommy, I care about you, and that means I care if you eat*. And so this had become something special, something theirs, where Tommy would eat a BLT and chatter Mr. Sam’s ear off about whatever came to his mind.

(Lately, Mr. Sam did most of the talking)

“I’m fine,” and the lie had been sulfur on his tongue, “I just didn’t sleep well last night, that’s all.” And that was that.

Rationally, he knew no one believed his flimsy excuses—*oh, I’m not hungry, I ate earlier, yeah I’m just a bit tired, I can’t go to the movies I have so much make up work to do*—but he couldn’t really bring himself to care. Tommy wasn’t an idiot, he saw the careful glances from Tubbo across the chemistry classroom, the way Ranboo’s whole body would sway away from him, as if afraid to touch; they all thought he was something wild, a cornered animal about to bite.

And fuck, did that make him angry. Because they were right; because he was *trying*, God, he was trying. He read those Tumblr blog-posts on ‘How To Deal With Depression,’ practiced all the breathing exercises and drew monarch butterflies on his forearms, drank—all the little tricks that people swore would fix him. *You don’t understand*, he wanted to scream each time Tubbo would give him that pitying look of his his that said I’m Sorry You’re Like This, *you don’t get it, I’m trying. I’m trying so hard...the house is just so empty*.

(One night, the ones where he and Dream just sat quietly on a discord call pretending to write but staring at ceilings instead, he couldn’t help but ask the question. *Have you ever torn yourself apart?*)

(Dream had been something almost silent, the waves brushing against the shore, moonlight. Breathing. Then: *everyday I wish I hadn’t*.)

He wasn’t surprised when he got his second semester progress report and saw all an assortment of Cs and Ds. His teachers had spent the entire semester tutting quietly at him as they passed his desk, sending him pointed looks when passing out graded papers neatly folded in half, giving him forced, polite smiles when they asked him to ‘meet me after class.’ They told him that he was promising, bright; *I know you can do better than this Mr. Watson*, they would scold, voice lofty with fake empathy and ivory towers, *there are tools at your disposal for you to succeed, you just need to seek them out. I would love to see you dedicate*



*yourself more to your studies.* It was all horse shit, in his opinion. Whatever ‘tools’ were lying in wait to be picked up were useless now—there was something in him that had broken, and no repair-job could fix it.

He shouldn’t have been surprised at the disappointment in his father’s face when he found the orange envelope pinned to the fridge with a magnet, how his brows crinkled and thin lips drew into a frown. And yet, Tommy had still found a flicker of surprise deep in his chest when he saw how his father shook his head, shoulders lifting and falling with a deep sigh as he threw the crinkled papers on the kitchen counter and turned to face his son.

*(There you are, a part of him wanted to jeer, you finally see me, huh?)*

“Really, Toms?” His father managed to smoothen his features into something that didn’t resemble disgust so closely, and Tommy fought a strangled laugh from bubbling up his throat. Phil pinched at the tension between his brow and above his nose, allowing an exasperated huff of air. “Look, I know that you struggle with school, that’s fine! I never... look, I know you aren’t like your brothers when it comes to studying, but could you at least put in a little effort?”

His tongue went dry. “Yeah. Right.”

From the blank stare Phil gave him that was not the response he wanted. “Really, Tommy, do you understand how many kids would kill for the opportunities you’ve been given—”

“I’m trying, alright? I just—this year was, uh, it was...”

“Theseus Watson I don’t want to hear any excuses coming out of your mouth, alright young man? Now I’ve got to pay for summer classes so you can retake these courses and...” Phil sighed, leaning back against the counter as he seemed to take Tommy in, and he couldn’t help but wonder what his father saw in him. Was he his mirror? A spitting image flipped and distorted through light? Or was he a shadow, something following him he couldn’t shake off. Phil rubbed the back of his neck, hesitating, “Tommy, I know that we’re not...we don’t talk. But even I can see you’re ignoring your responsibilities. I mean, you’re on that game all day and staying up late on the computer! You need to take school more serious, your future.”

“I am, I am serious,” he licked his lips, sulfur, “I am.”

That night, after he had eaten what little he could of his dinner and retreated upstairs into his bedroom, he had made a beeline for the DS sitting on his bedside table. He picked it up gently, thumb brushing over the white scuff-mark on its case, easing it from one hand to the other as he fiddled with the Dragon Ball Z charm hanging from the stylus, the sticky buttons and scratched screen. He hummed—a whole world in the palm of his hand, huh?

He lifted it above his head; Tommy was tired of trying.

The world fractures as a DS shatters across the carpeted floor of a childhood bedroom, it breaks itself into misfit wires and whining plastic. The world falls apart, and a boy sees himself for the first time in the reflection of a warped, flickering screen—Wild Thing, they

call him, Beast, and he relishes in the feeling of something sharp and deadly under his fingernails.

(GAME OVER. TRY AGAIN? TRY AGAIN? TRY AGAIN?)

The world fizzles out as the power goes out; as medicine cabinets become veils; as boys become men then what lays forgotten; as lilies; as torn out notebook pages; as clogged sinks and cracked open bathroom stalls; as a microphone hissing static; as car rides; fireworks; the world dies, and Tommy is left breathing in the fallout.

*Sometimes you don't die when you're supposed to*, he had said one morning at a cliffside, gunpowder becoming ash-fall, snow, *and now I have a choice.*

In that moment thousands of universes had imploded and made their threads known, wrapping around his shuddering hands and drawing them towards Mr. Sam's comforting embrace; it was then, as poetry fell from his lips and into his awaiting palms, as he held it close to his chest and felt the trembling of his heart, that he could see the infinities awaiting him.

So a new world begins, as it always does, and this time there is no GAME OVER screen in sight.

Mr. Sam does not let go of Tommy once as they shuffle down the hillside of the canyon, and for that he is grateful—he couldn't imagine where his feet might take him if left to his own devices, and the solid pressure on the back of his neck helped ease the tightness from his chest. Tommy was an inherently antsy person ("It's called anxiety, idiot," Tubbo would correct), but he hadn't felt this much like a live-wire in a long time. It was different from the electricity buzzing underneath his skins before tests or presentations, or hell, even before the open mic—he felt like he was in a constant state of unraveling. A loose thread, caught wrapped around an obstacle and threatening to destroy the entire tapestry he had so painstakingly worked to weave.

*The poet on a high-wire*, he thought bemusedly, *isn't this a story I've heard before?*

He felt Mr. Sam's thumb whisper back and forth on his spine, an absent-minded reassurance. As if to say, *it's alright, I've got you.*

Air settled in his lungs, and for the first time that night he welcomed its weight; this wasn't all there was.

"Fucking finally!"

Tommy heard Puffy before he saw her, the echo of her shout shattering the quiet the fireworks had left in their wake. He looked up to see her waving her arms, and he couldn't help the timid smile pulling at his lips as she raced towards him. Puff let out a loud whoop as she crashed into him, reaching up to wrap her arms around his neck and drag him down in an awkward embrace.

He laughed, melting into the hug as they rocked back and forth from Puffy's velocity. The older poet let out a content sigh, and for a moment he squeezed his eyes and pretended that this was just another night, where he and his team had gotten out of practice late and shared goodbyes under moth-circled light. That this was a world with no smashed consoles or locked doors or do-overs—this was just them, holding each other close.

"You have us a fright there, kiddo. It's good to see you." Puffy's breath was soft in his hair, hands gentle as they curled around the nape of his neck protectively. Tommy's heart startled in his chest as guilt washed over him; *oh*, he wanted to cry suddenly, to apologize, *I didn't mean to scare you*.

He pressed his forehead to collar bone, and knew she felt the pricks of tear drops soaking through her shirt. "It's good to see you too, Captain."

Puffy hummed quietly, grip tightening. "We missed you, up there. What would we do without our little Ferlinghetti?"

Tommy's laughter was wet as he pulled away, rubbing his eyes pink with the heel of his palm—God, he needed to stop crying, it was seriously getting embarrassing. *It's...it feels nice though*, he couldn't help but return Puffy's watery smile, *having someone there to help him put the pieces back together. Someone who won't run away when they see how small they are*.

"Yeah, who else will I bully in slam practice?" Dream crowed from behind him, arms suddenly latched onto Tommy's shoulders like a giant squid. Tommy pretended to huff as Dream ruffled his hair, eyes crinkling in the corners as he allowed the poet to lean against him. "Besides, we have to show off all the hard work we put into that duet."

"You mean I put in," he hoped the jab sounded sharper through his sniffles than he thought it did, "if I remember correctly, you spent like eighty percent of the time making me watch your parkour InstaReels."

"Ha ha, very funny," Dream flicked Tommy's ear, snorting at the affronted glare he received, "but *whoever* wrote it went hard. Everyone couldn't stop coming up to me after the mic, they were absolutely blown away."

Tommy blinked. "Really?"

The blonde haired man's constant smirk fell away into a soft smile. "Really. You did amazing, dude. Everyone was raving about you."

"From what I've heard you've got yourself quite the fan base," Mr. Sam said teasingly, but Tommy couldn't ignore how his eyes glittered with pride, "Karl was blowing up my phone about it, he wants you at every open mic from now on."

Tommy winced, blood rushing to his cheeks—he wasn't used to this much praise, the giddiness tight in his chest as he blinked owlishly at the English lit teacher. Karl had liked it? And he had told Mr. Sam? He tried to put on an air of bravado to hide the cartwheels his

stomach was doing at the thought, puffing out his chest, “well of course I have fans! Big men like me always have groupies, you know.”

Puffy hummed in fake contemplation, crossing her arms and tapping her finger on her chin. “Ehhhh, I find it hard to believe that a little guy like you could have such a following. I don’t know, what do you think Sam?”

“Hm. You might be right about that one, Captain,” Mr. Sam played along, trying to hide his amusement as he mimicked Puffy’s pose, donning a thoughtful scowl, “I think we’d have to see the ‘Big Man’ in action to really tell if he’s worth all the press. Gotta investigate.”

“Okay first of all I’m not ‘little,’ I am in fact six inches taller than you Puffy and absolutely massive,” Dream gave a skeptical hum at that, and for both of their sakes Tommy resolved to ignore it, instead turning to Mr. Sam. He was practically beaming, he was sure of it, with all this excitement threatening to overwhelm him, “you’re actually coming to the slam? Like, to see us? *Live?*”

A heavy bout of silence rung throughout the group, and for a moment Tommy worried he had said something wrong or had been too presumptuous. Dream’s hands fisted tighter in Tommy’s sweatshirt, and in front of him he could see Puffy’s eyes blow wide and teary; Mr. Sam just offered a tender smile, leaning in close as if telling a secret, “kid, I’m coming to see *you*.”

Oh. That was...

(“Me and Techno are leaving this weekend for another tournament. Should be gone only three days,” his dad drawled as he stabbed a spear of asparagus. He had been six, and this was the fourth dinner he had without needing a booster made up of Phil’s old textbooks to reach the plate. Even then, he knew the feeling making his throat constrict and feel icky, making his eyes sting—dread. He should be used to it, really he should, but it was always... not fun when Dad and Tech left for a tournament. He missed them. And the house was too quiet, too empty)

(*And Wilby gets mean*, he didn’t dare utter then, instead focusing on making a volcano out of his mashed potatoes, *he gets sad and mean and he tells me to go away. I don’t like being alone*)

“That’s nice,” he said, and he was sure that Shakespeare would have written sonnets about the star dust falling into his eyes. He didn’t know how else to explain it, the thing rising in his chest, tickling his lungs and making him want to cry, or laugh; it was just *nice*, the thought that someone was looking forward to seeing him perform, looking forward to just being near him. And for it to be Mr. Sam—who he practically idolized, who had bought him sandwiches every week and refused to take his money, who bought him a subscription to the Paris Review, who taught him how to tie a bow-tie for winter formal—well, he thought he might cry again.

“Yeah, it is nice.” Mr. Sam agreed easily, as if this was all something simple, a problem he had worked out long before Tommy had ever laid eyes on it. Not for the first time, Tommy

wondered what the man thought when he looked at him. “What’s also nice is getting you to bed. You’ve had a long day, kiddo. You need rest.”

“I second that,” Puffy chimed, finally extracting herself from Tommy’s hold and dusting off her pants, “let’s get some food in you first, though. Something tells me that your brother didn’t take you to eat after the open mic.”

“How would you have guessed?” His retort was dry as he fiddled with the hem of Mr. Sam’s jacket. Sure, now that he wasn’t crying his heart out he was absolutely starving, and some water would be nice for the headache beginning to drum at the base of his ear, but he was more nervous about what came after the meal. He didn’t want to go home, not while Wilbur still prowled like a caged lion; not while this thing fluttering in his chest was still new and so, so breakable.

(*Hope is the thing with feathers*, Emily Dickinson used to say, and Tommy was afraid what happened if this fragile sparrow was plucked)

Puffy seemed to catch on to Tommy’s hesitance, taking his hand and giving it a squeeze. “Don’t worry, about anything right now. Let’s just focus on getting you some food and sleep, then we can deal with the rest tomorrow. I’m sure either of us wouldn’t mind—”

*BBBBRRRRRR!*

They all startled as a loud car horn echoed throughout the dusty canyon, bouncing off the hills still browned from past wildfires. Dream automatically covered his ears, his cursing drowned out by whoever decided to lay on their horn. Tommy craned his neck, hand shielding his face as he squinted at whoever had their high-beams on—was it the cops? The fire department? *God, the cherry on top of this shit-show of an ice cream Sunday would to have to call Phil for bail money.*

The person driving let up off their horn with a sharp *honk*, followed by a familiar bellow that sent shivers down Tommy’s spine:

“You bitch ass motherfucker!”

Oh fuck no. This was much worse than cops—much, *much* worse.

There, leaning out the passenger seat of the car in all his righteous glory was Tubbo Underscore. And from the fury alight in his eyes, he was fucking *pissed*.

“Tommy Watson,” his best friend seethed, “you have fifty-five seconds to get your ass in this car, or there will be *hell* to pay.”

...thoughts on our first Phil POV anyone? Also I have a deep seated hatred for parts of this chapter but love for others so in my mind, it's mid.

Poem mentioned is "Hope" is the thing with feathers by Emily Dickinson

Anyways! Follow me @zeeskeit5 on twitter, you can see some behind the scenes there, spotify playlists i make for the characters, and just my general dumpster fire of a life broadcasted for the world! Again, thank you so much for reading, and I hope you're having a wonderful day :D hopefully the next chapter will be out soon!

Stay safe, and send me any poetry recs you'd like to share! <3

Works inspired by this one

[When All Spirals Down, Are We Still Family?](#) by [kyibur](#)

[Restricted Work] by [Lorewashere \(orphan\\_account\)](#).

[Perhaps, it was never something I had done](#) by [orphan\\_account](#)

[Writing Isn't The Only Way of Coping](#) by [Mun\\_Studios](#)

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